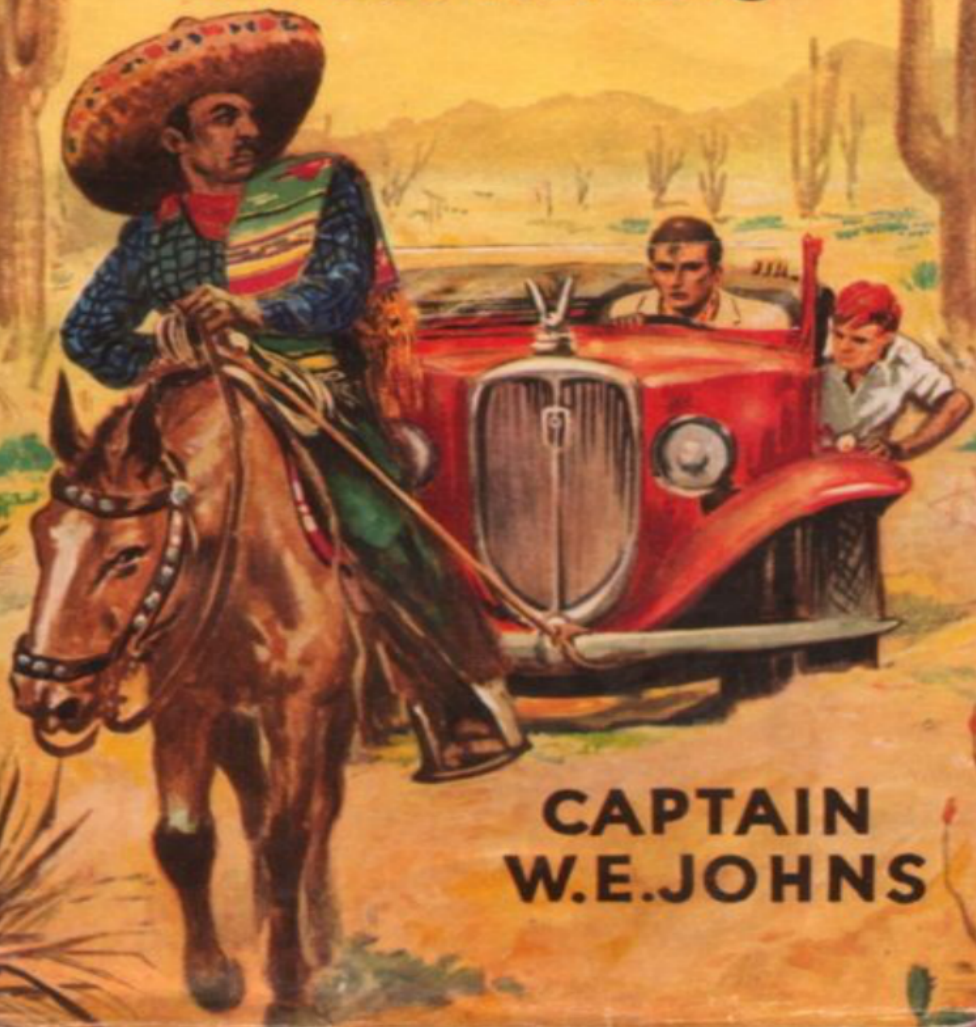


Biggles

IN MEXICO



CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS

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FOREWORD

Biggles' visit to Mexico was one of the more unusual cases he was asked to investigate. It was unique in several ways. In the first place it did not really come within his province. The country, being off his usual 'beat', was unknown to him except by reputation and from what he was able to gather from the map. Until his arrival he had had no first-hand experience of the area in which he was to operate.

Again, being in a foreign country he had no authority, and could not therefore rely on local assistance as would have been the case in any of the countries which form the British Commonwealth of Nations. He had no aircraft. In fact, he had no transport of any sort after his hired car had let him down. For most of the time he was cut off from his assistants, Algy and Bertie, except through a postal letter service of doubtful efficiency.

Although opposed to men who would certainly be armed, neither he, nor Ginger who was with him, carried a weapon, the import of arms being forbidden. He might have got a 'permit' for one, but that would have meant giving reasons, which he was not prepared to do for fear of jeopardizing his inquiries.

Actually, he thought it unlikely that he would need one, for his mission was originally intended to be no more than a simple routine investigation, occupying a couple of days at the outside. However, through unforeseen events for which he was not responsible it developed into something more than that.

CHAPTER 1

SUN AND SAND

THE sun blazed. It flayed the thirsty desert with bars of heat that knew no mercy, turning the arid north-west corner of Mexico into a glowing desolation. The air writhed and quivered under the relentless lash.

Over all hung an ominous calm. A sinister silence. A profound, smothering silence, as if all life had been blotted out. Nothing stirred except the heatwaves, which set some distant mountains dancing and the horizon shimmering like a restless sea.

There was no colour anywhere. All had faded in the devouring white light hurled down from a sky of burnished steel. Under it everything stood still and stark. The shadows of the *saguaro*s, the giant cactuses which stood like the pillars of a lost civilization, were thin and pale. Some of these monstrous vegetables had lost their flesh, having had it pecked out by desperate birds of passage, so that only the skeleton remained.

With a blast of heat as from a furnace the fiery master overhead struck at everything without discrimination. The dull alkaline sand; the grey *chaparral* — the usual desert growths of mesquit, yucca, agave, cactus and sagebrush. It struck at the bleaching bones of creatures that had perished; at outcrops of sand-eroded rock; boulders and buttes; meaningless patterns of *arroyos*, gullies, and dried-up river beds that looked as if the tongues of stricken monsters had scoured the earth in a frenzied search for moisture.

It struck at the road that wound a sinuous course across the waste — if two ruts wriggling through the sand could be called a road. It struck at a heap of blistered wood and rusty metal, half buried in a drift of wind-blown sand, that had once been a motor-car. And it struck at a touring car which, grey with dust, crawled along the track towards the wreck.

There were two men in the car. Their faces, too, were grey with dust. Through it sweat had furrowed little lines. Even their friends would have found it hard to recognize Biggles of the Air Police, or his companion, Police Pilot Ginger Hebblethwaite.

For the most part they travelled in silence, their lips shut tight to conserve the natural saliva of their mouths. But coming to the abandoned automobile Biggles spoke. 'This could be Tricky Adamson's car. It's a Ford and has a Californian number plate. It must be somewhere about here.'

'Unless his tale was a lie.'

'As you say, unless he lied; but I think he told the truth. The landscape conforms to what he said of it, anyway.'

'And the heat,' muttered Ginger.

Biggles stopped the car. They got out and walked to the wreck. As Biggles looked in the open window, with a squawk of fright a little owl flew out.

Biggles made a brief inspection. 'As one would expect, the car's been stripped of anything worth taking. We shall find nothing here. Let's press on.'

They returned to their own car.

As Biggles started it and moved forward Ginger said: 'If anything goes wrong we're likely to end up like that. We must have been out of our minds to tackle this run in a used car.'

'You mean, I must have been,' corrected Biggles. 'The scheme was mine. I didn't imagine anything like this. Maybe I should, but it's always easy to foresee trouble after it's happened. I allowed for a run of from two to three hours. Certainly not more than four. And, foolishly perhaps, I expected to find an occasional garage on the way. I know the map showed desert, but this track we're on was marked as a road, as indeed it was till we got to the frontier.'

'It's been getting worse ever since. It looks as if it might peter out altogether. If it does we shall be in a mess. I should have gone lighter on those four bottles of mineral water we started with.'

'We're nearer to being in a mess than you realize,' said Biggles, grimly.

'I notice the radiator's boiling.'

'It isn't that that worries me so much, although at the rate things are going we may need that water for drinking before we've finished.'

Ginger looked at Biggles face. 'What's the trouble?'

'The clutch is slipping. I realized it as soon as we started on that first long hill. It's been getting worse, fast, ever since, grinding through this infernal sand. No car could be expected to stand up to such treatment for long.'

'What if we come to another hill?'

'We couldn't make it. She'd burn right out. It's taking me all my time to keep her going on the level. I daren't go any faster. In fact, I couldn't. A few more miles of this and she'll go altogether.'

'I have a feeling we went wrong at that last fork. There was no signpost, you remember. Hadn't we better turn back?'

'No use.'

'Why not?'

'I couldn't get her over that last hill. Our only chance now is to carry on and hope we don't come to another.'

'Assuming we're on the right track, how far do you reckon we are from Eltora?'

'Not less than thirty miles.'

'As much as that! How do we go for petrol?'

'All being well we might just do it. We started with ample — as I thought; but in this sort of going we're doing less than ten to the gallon.'

After a short silence Ginger went on. 'You know, there's something ironic about this. We took Tricky's tale about being lost in the desert with a pinch of salt. Now it begins to look more and more as if he was telling the truth. How else could he have known what sort of country this is?'

'He wouldn't get the information from a map, which is what I went on.'

‘We should have flown in.’

‘There were arguments against that, as I explained before we left home. A car seemed more in line for what we had to do. But it’s no use talking about that now.’

‘Hadn’t we better stop to let her cool down a bit?’

‘That would mean staying here half the night. How could she cool under this blistering sun? If we stop she may never start again.’

Suddenly the car lurched. The clutch whined. The engine stopped.

Without a word Biggles opened the door and got out. He walked round, looked at the wheels and came back.

‘We’re in soft sand,’ he announced, grimly. The nearside wheel is in up to the axle. My fault. Talking, I let her wander out of the rut. That’s the only place where the sand’s hard.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger, as he got down.

‘Obviously, we shall have to try to get her out. What else can we do? Go behind and shove for all you’re worth when I accelerate.’

Ginger went to the back of the car and put a shoulder against it. ‘Okay. I’m ready,’ he called.

Biggles returned to his seat and started the engine. Three times he revved up. Sand flew from the spinning wheels, the clutch screaming in protest. But the car didn’t move forward an inch.

‘No use,’ said Biggles, getting out again. ‘I’m only digging the wheels farther in.’ He went round, and dropping on his knees clawed away much of the soft sand. Seeing what he was doing Ginger helped him. The cavities thus made they filled with stones and small pieces of rock.

‘Let’s try again,’ said Biggles.

Positions were resumed. The clutch screamed again, smoking. The wheels flung the stones out. The car refused to budge.

‘Hunt around for some brushwood,’ ordered Biggles.

With sweat streaming down his face Ginger went to a clump of withered sagebrush. A harsh rattle caused him to sidestep with alacrity.

‘What’s that?’ called Biggles.

‘Rattler.’

‘Be careful. In the mess we’re in if you got bitten you wouldn’t have a hope.’

‘You needn’t tell me,’ answered Ginger, caustically.

He watched the deadly snake glide away and then, collecting an armful of dead stuff returned to the car. He helped Biggles to tuck it under the wheels. Biggles fetched his mackintosh from the boot and pushed that under the wheel most deeply in, remarking sarcastically: ‘It doesn’t look as if I’m likely to need this.’

Ginger took up his position again at the back of the car.

‘Now,’ shouted Biggles.

The sticks flew out. The mac was torn to shreds. Blue smoke appeared. The

air was full of the smell of hot oil. The car quivered, but remained stationary. Biggles switched off again.

‘No use,’ he said, getting out. ‘At this game we shall soon have no tyres left. This sand will cut through hot rubber like a file through butter.’ He sat on the running board and lit a cigarette.

Ginger mopped sweat from his face and joined him. ‘If some people I know could see us they’d laugh,’ he remarked, smiling.

Biggles smiled, too. ‘It isn’t really funny,’ he said. ‘It looks as if we have a thirty-mile walk in front of us. I’m nothing for walking at any time, but in this heat—’ he broke off, staring along the track in front of them. ‘Here comes someone,’ he went on. ‘If he’s a local maybe he can suggest something.’

The man, riding a weary-looking horse, came on, and presently drew level. He turned out to be a Mexican Indian, a sombrero on the back of his head. The ends of a red handkerchief, tied round his neck, dangled on a check shirt. A long thin cigar drooped from his lips. He carried a quirt. A lariat hung from his saddle. He stopped, looked at the car, smiled cynically and greeted the travellers in Spanish.

A rather difficult conversation ensued. Biggles explained the situation. Not that it needed much explaining. What had happened to the car was too obvious. He learned that the track would take them to Eltora, which was only about twenty miles on.

‘Twenty miles,’ groaned Ginger, still thinking of walking.

‘*Seco, seco,*’ said the Mexican, waving a hand towards the south.

‘We can see it’s dry, brother,’ murmured Ginger.

The man dismounted and quietly examined the car. Then he unhooked the coil of rope from his saddle, leaving one end fastened, and attached the other end to the front of the car. Remounting, he urged the horse forward until the rope was taut and then struck the animal a sharp blow on the flank with his quirt. The horse strained, and with a crunch of stones and twigs the car came clear.

‘Hooray,’ cried Ginger, huskily, through his dry lips.

‘*Gracias. Muchas gracias, señor,*’ acknowledged Biggles.

The Mexican smiled, flashing white teeth. He removed his lariat from the car, coiled it, and returning it to its place on the saddle, remounted. Raising his sombrero he murmured: ‘*Buenos dias, señors,*’ and went on his way.

‘That’s better,’ said Biggles, getting into his seat.

‘Bit of luck for us he came along,’ answered Ginger, thankfully.

‘I’d call it more than a bit,’ returned Biggles. ‘It was a nice big slice. We’ll push on, anyhow for as far as she’ll take us. Every mile helps.’

He started the car, let in the clutch gently, and they proceeded on their way, slowly, Biggles keeping the wheels in the ruts and coaxing the car along to save the weakening clutch as much as possible.

‘I suppose I could be blamed for buying a second-hand car,’ he remarked, after a time, as they crawled along, leaving behind them a cloud of pale blue

vapour. 'As you know, I did it to save dollars. There didn't seem any point in spending a lot of money on a brand-new car which we should only need for a short time. I tried this one and it seemed all right; but that, of course, was on a macadam road, a very different matter from this. I wasn't expecting anything quite as rural. However, it's done, so saying what we should have done won't help matters.'

'We're doing fine,' declared Ginger. 'If that instrument is reliable we've covered close on ten miles since we stuck.'

There was another long silence. The sun still blazed from a sky now turning the colour of copper. The landscape remained unchanged except that Ginger thought he could see some rising ground ahead. He regarded it with misgivings. The car, with its clutch often complaining, slowly ate its way through the miles.

'If that fellow who helped us knew what he was talking about we should soon be in Eltora,' remarked Ginger, cheerfully.

'We've done twenty miles since then, but as you can see for yourself there's nothing in sight except more desert. He probably meant well, but I suspect his idea of mileage was a bit wide of the mark. Is it my imagination or does the ground begin to slope up in front of us? It's hard to see in this dazzle.'

Ginger stared ahead. It's a hill, but it doesn't look very steep.'

'It may be too steep for us. This old crock won't take much more. Hark at her! She'll need a new set of gears by the time we get to Eltora. Even if there is a garage it's unlikely they'll stock spare parts.'

They came to the foot of a long, gentle slope. Ginger grimaced at the noise the car was making. He looked back. 'She's smoking like stink,' he informed Biggles. 'She'll go on fire if you keep on.'

Biggles didn't answer. He did all he knew, but it was no use. Half-way up the slope, on a rather steep section, the screaming clutch packed up. The car stopped. Biggles switched off and mopped his perspiring face. 'That's it,' he announced laconically.

There was a short silence.

'What do we do now?' asked Ginger.

'That's easy to answer,' returned Biggles. 'We can sit here or we can get out and walk.'

'Walk! In this heat? With the luggage?'

'If you decide to walk you'd better forget about the luggage. Eltora isn't even in sight.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Stay here. It'll be dark presently.'

'That means it will at least be cooler.'

'It also means that if you got off this track you might never find it again. In that case you'll have had it; make no mistake about that. You couldn't last a day, on your feet, in this desert.'

‘If we stay we’re here for the night.’

‘We should still be on the track in the morning. Somebody may come along.’

‘We’ve done some trips in our time but this is one I shall remember,’ murmured Ginger.

Biggles lit a cigarette.

Sitting on the running board they watched the sun sink behind the distant mountains, filling the world with a crimson unreality. The moon, a gigantic yellow orb, soared into view.

‘A thought has just occurred to me,’ said Ginger.

‘What is it?’

‘If that fellow was wrong about the distance to Eltora he might just as well be wrong about the road. This may lead nowhere.’

‘That,’ said Biggles, getting up and putting his foot on an enormous black spider that was trying to get into the car, ‘would be just too bad.’ Suddenly he laughed softly.

‘What’s the joke?’ asked Ginger, surprised.

‘If you remember, when the chief sent for me to discuss this affair, you were fancying yourself in the Wild West.’

‘Well?’

‘Now you’re there I hope you’re enjoying it, that’s all,’ said Biggles.

¹ A giant, tree-sized cactus that can grow to 50 feet tall.

CHAPTER 2

A MOST UNLIKELY STORY

WHAT Biggles and Ginger were doing, in a surface vehicle instead of an aircraft, in a part of the world unknown to both of them, must now be explained at some length if the essential facts are to be grasped.

The business, as might be supposed, had started in Air Police Headquarters, in London, a fortnight earlier. This, from the beginning, is how it had come about.

Biggles and his staff pilots were having a dull spell. One morning, Ginger, who for something to do had been checking the small-arms in the Air Police Armoury, walked into the Operations Room with a forty-five Webley revolver in his hand. With it he took a series of imaginary shots at a blue-bottle buzzing on a window pane.

Biggles glanced up from his desk. 'What's the idea?'

Ginger grinned. 'I'm only testing my speed on the draw.'

'Wild West stuff, eh?'

'Sure.'

'Forget it. Accuracy is more important than speed.'

'I've often wondered how it was done.'

'How what was done?'

'Knocking the spots out of the six of spades in six shots — and that sort of thing.'

'If ever that was done, which I doubt, there were precious few men who could do it,' asserted Biggles, cynically.

'Do you mean that's all bunk?'

'I do. And the same goes for all these high-speed sharp-shooting cowboys, sheriffs, rustlers and gamblers you see in action at the cinema or on the television screen. That's the only place it happens or ever did happen.'

'Are you seriously telling me it can't really be done?' Ginger sounded pained at being disillusioned.

Biggles shrugged. 'Once in a blue moon, maybe. It's just something that has grown into the traditional cowboy yarns of the wild and woolly West. Pretty to watch, and fascinating to read about, but mostly imagination. Still, there's no denying it makes a good story, this shooting from the hip and using the thumb on the hammer instead of the trigger to gain a split second. Most of that comes into the category of fiction, not fact.'

'You seem quite convinced of that.'

'I am.'

'Why?'

'Because I've tried it, and I've had plenty of opportunity to practise. Moreover, having come through two wars I've seen a lot of fellows try it

without getting on the mark. Years ago, when I was in the Service and fancied my chance with a gun, I did a three weeks' revolver course at The School of Musketry, and you can take it from me that to hit a target the size of a man at twenty yards isn't as easy as it's made to look in pictures. And that's taking deliberate aim. Shooting from the hip is much more difficult. I must have fired hundreds of rounds. After all, the cartridges cost me nothing. Before you say I didn't practise enough let me remind you that the average wage of a cowboy in the old days was about ten pounds a month. A cartridge out West cost him around three shillings. Now work it out yourself and tell me how such a man could afford to waste bullets and still have enough money for a frolic when he rode into town?

'You know, you're getting in the habit of debunking everything,' protested Ginger.

Biggles grinned. 'Maybe that's old age creeping on me. Age means experience. So I say it's time somebody did a bit of debunking of the stuff they dish out for gullible people to lap up. As a matter of interest it was some American newspaper men who showed up this fancy shooting only the other day. They looked up one of the famous old-time gunmen and asked him how it was done. He gave a demonstration. Did he shoot from the hip? Not on your life. What he did was hold out the gun in front of him with both hands, take careful aim and squeeze the trigger. He said that was how it was really done. Mugs who tried the fancy stuff didn't last long.'

'Now hold you hard, old boy, and let me say *my* little piece,' requested Bertie Lissie. 'I've *seen* it done. Absolutely. Yes, by Jove. Moving targets, too.'

'What you saw was a trick.'

'Trick! Can't I believe my own peepers?'

'No.' Biggles laughed softly at Bertie's expression. 'Where did you see this slick gun-play — at a music-hall?'

'At a circus. A chappie dolled up like Buffalo Bill threw electric light bulbs into the air one after the other and busted them with his gun. He never missed.'

'Of course he didn't. I could have done it the way he did it.'

'Are you telling me this was all fake?'

'Of course. You assumed he was shooting with ordinary single bullets.'

Bertie blinked. 'Wasn't he?'

'Use your head. Had he used bullets he'd have punched holes in the roof. Once, after watching one of these fancy marksmen I bought him a few drinks and asked him how he did it. All you do is load some cartridges with a pinch of dust shot. The pellets, fifty or more of them, spread over an area half a yard across, so if one shot didn't hit the mark you would be unlucky, wouldn't you? It's as simple as that.' Biggles' smile broadened.

'Well, stuff me with suet pudding,' muttered Bertie, disgustedly. 'To think I soaked it all up. Ain't there no honesty left in the world?'

‘Not as much as there used to be,’ returned Biggles. ‘Don’t worry. You weren’t the only one to be taken in. To come back to what started us off on this tack, you can take this supersonic claw-fingered gun-play with a large spoonful of salt. Not one man in a million can do it, which may be a good thing for us. Speed’s no use if you don’t shoot straight. In air combat I was never scared of the man who started burning powder at extreme range. It was the type who held his fire that gave me palpitations. But don’t let me spoil your fun. As I said just now, this high-speed *bang-bang* stuff makes a good story.’

The discussion was brought to a close by the buzz of the intercom telephone. Bertie, who happened to be nearest, answered it. ‘Okay, sir,’ he said. Having replaced the receiver he looked at Biggles. ‘That was the chief. He wants to see you in his office.’

‘When?’

‘Right away.’

Biggles got up. ‘Fasten your belts, chaps,’ he murmured. ‘This sounds like work.’

He made his way down the corridor to the office of the head of his department, and after a warning knock on the door, entered.

‘Come in, Bigglesworth,’ requested the Air Commodore. With a curious expression on his face he went on: ‘Sit down and be prepared to listen to the most unlikely story you ever heard. Help yourself to cigarettes. You may need them.’

‘If the story is as unlikely as that, sir, why trouble to tell it?’ inquired Biggles.

‘Because,’ answered the Air Commodore, ‘I have a feeling that somewhere deep down in the bottom of it there may be a few grains of truth.’

Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘Go ahead, sir. I’m listening.’

The Air Commodore began. ‘Do you remember, nearly a year ago, a big diamond robbery in London? It was in the small hours of a Sunday morning. A caretaker in the City was shot dead and the thieves got away with a parcel of diamonds valued at between a hundred and fifty and two hundred thousand pounds. To some people they would be worth more. The crooks were never caught — apparently they succeeded in getting out of the country with the loot.’

‘I recall the case, but it wasn’t up our street so I only know what I read in the papers.’

‘For certain reasons some of the details were not released to the press. We knew the names of the men concerned with the robbery but we didn’t want them to know we knew. It was thought that would give us a better chance of catching them.’

‘How?’

‘If they thought we didn’t know them they might stay in the country. Should they have gone abroad they might, feeling safe, come back.’

'They got abroad, you say?'

'Yes.'

'And they haven't come back?'

'No. At the moment it looks as if they intend to stay where they are.'

'And where's that?'

'In Mexico.'

Biggles stared. '*Mexico!* What the deuce are they doing there? How in the name of all that's fantastic did they get there, anyway?'

'That's what I'm going to tell you — if there's any truth in a statement that has just been made by an informer. I warned you that the story would strain your credulity. However, as you may have to go to Mexico you'd better hear it for what it's worth.'

'Have these crooks still got the diamonds?'

'Again, if there's any truth in what we've been told, there's reason to believe they still have the bulk of them. The government would pay more than their value to get them back. Politics come into it. These were not gem stones. They were commercial diamonds, indispensable for high-class industrial purposes. Which is why, as you probably know, their export to potential enemy countries is absolutely forbidden. Consequently, if these stones arrived in, say, Russia or China, America would be very peeved about it. Certain sections of the American press might even hint that we had wangled the whole business to get round the export regulations. We don't want that to happen.'

'Of course not. But if you know where these crooks have gone to ground why not collect 'em under an Extradition Warrant?'

The Air Commodore shook his head sadly. 'Extradition, the giving up of a criminal who has got abroad to the government of the country in which the crime was committed, is just about the trickiest business in the whole practice of law. Actually, there is no law of Extradition. One can't *demand* the handing over of a criminal. It is always a matter of agreement with the particular country concerned, and these agreements differ in almost every case. Great Britain has Extradition Treaties of one sort or another with most civilized countries, but the terms differ. Certain crimes, only the most serious, are listed, but even these are judged differently by the various nations.'

'I know that offences of a political nature are seldom if ever included even where Extradition arrangements are in force.'

'That is correct. Of course, if there is no Extradition Treaty nothing can be done. It really boils down to this. If a country doesn't want to give up a man, nothing can make it do so. Which is why so many extradition cases drag on for months or sometimes years. Even when you do get your man he can only be tried for the specific offence named in the Warrant. Some countries will not in any circumstances give up one of its own subjects. Others will not hand over a man to the country in which the crime was committed; they will only send him back to his own country. And so it goes on, wheels within wheels.'

You see how complicated it all is.'

'But this diamond robbery was a deliberate crime, involving murder. How could there be anything political about it?'

'If a country had reasons for not wanting to give up these crooks it could be argued that the crime was political, because, as I have said, the import and export of diamonds is subject to international agreement.'

'It sounds like a messy business.'

'It is. Everybody wants diamonds. No country wants to part with them. They could be used as a pretty substantial bribe. If those stolen diamonds were destined for a communist country, and it now seems that they were, it would be no use asking a friend of that country to hand over the thieves — or their loot. Some countries might be afraid of upsetting Russia. So you see how we're fixed. Again, once you start Extradition proceedings there's always a chance of the crooks being tipped off, in which case they have only to cross the nearest frontier when you have to start all over again.'

'Which would you rather have, the crooks or the diamonds?' asked Biggles.

'Naturally, as cold-blooded murder comes into the picture we'd like to get our hands on both; but if we could prevent the diamonds from reaching the wrong people it would be something.'

'How many crooks were there in this raid?'

'Three, possibly four. The informer might have been in it although he swears he wasn't. Not that that means anything. You can't believe a man known to be a liar.'

'Were these fellows British?'

'One, certainly. We don't know about the other two. They may have procured passports, genuine or false. Being professional crooks they know all the tricks. They had been in this country for some time when the job was done. The leader of the gang, and the brains of it, is a man we know as Nicolas Brabinsky, which might, or might not, be his real name. Anyhow, that was the name under which he entered this country as a Polish refugee. He's a cut above the others, and being the flashy type, soon became known as Ritzzy. You know what a passion all these people have for nicknames.'

'Could you never pin anything on him?'

'No. He was a bit too smart. He did the organizing but left the work to assistants. He had two regulars. The first of these was a dark-skinned half-breed named Carlos Cornelli, known to the underworld as Corny. He came here from South America as a guitar player in a dance band, and stayed here when the others went home, hanging about the shady night clubs. We believe he was a dope peddler when Ritzzy picked him up.'

'If he came from South America he'd speak Spanish, which would be useful in Mexico.'

'Of course. The third member of the party was, and apparently still is, a tough little cockney named Samuel Brimshawe, better known in certain

quarters as Nifty. He has a police record, starting at Borstal. We were looking for Cornelli at the time of the robbery to deport him as an undesirable alien. I may say this gang was suspected of being concerned with mailbag robberies. We had nothing on Ritzy, although since his disappearance we've heard that he once ran a smuggling racket, with his own boat, in the Mediterranean. That hooks up with our latest information.'

'How did you get all this gen?' inquired Biggles.

'I'm coming to that. The Yard has of course been working on the diamond robbery ever since it happened, but some details have just reached us from a squealer, a small-time London crook named David Adamson who rejoices in the nickname of Tricky. He seems to have lived up to it. He admits that he was once associated with the gang but left it before the diamond affair. Naturally he would say that.'

'You don't believe it?'

'No. He was in it until something went wrong. This is his story. How much is true and how much is lies you must judge for yourself. His tale takes some believing, but there could be something in it. It's probably a mixture of truth and lies.'

'Why did he squeal?'

'He gives several reasons, but I fancy the real one was this. As it was known to us that he had been associated with Nifty Brimshawe he was scared stiff, in view of the murder, that he might be picked up on the capital charge. Like most old lags he had a horror of the rope. Also, he was short of money.'

'In other words he had lost his nerve.'

'That's about the English of it.'

'Did he actually give himself up?'

'More or less, in quite unusual circumstances. Now, this is the story he tells. Get ready to raise your eyebrows.'

CHAPTER 3

STRANGER THAN FICTION

THE Air Commodore went on. 'In his fright at the diamond murder Tricky emigrated to Canada — so he says.'

'How did he manage that?'

'By the fairly simple process of taking a job as a deck hand on a transatlantic tramp steamer and deserting when he got to the other side. Having forfeited his pay by desertion he had no money, of course, so he had to see about getting some. How he went about this he hasn't told us, but we can imagine. With the police on his trail he skipped across the border into the United States and in due course made his way to San Francisco. He was soon in trouble again and had to do another bolt, this time into Mexico. He admits frankly that the police had reason to look for him.'

Biggles stared. 'Do you believe all this?'

'No. But it *could* be true, because it seems to be a fact that Tricky arrived in Mexico. And he wouldn't be likely to go there without a good reason. But never mind how he got there. For the purpose of argument let us say he did get there. How he managed that is where improbability really steps in to make truth wilt in the dust. According to Tricky he stole a car.'

'One can believe that, anyway.'

'Yes. And one can believe, as he claims, that he ran out of petrol soon after crossing the Mexican border, although it is more likely that with the police hot on his trail he thought it safer to abandon the car. Keeping off the road he went on on foot, got lost in a cactus forest and nearly died of thirst. As you probably know, the frontier between California and Mexico runs through some of the worst, and hottest, desert in the world. However, luck was still with him. He was found by a party of Indian smugglers, who took him along with them. He stayed with them for a time and then plodded on to a flat-roofed *pueblo*, or village, a little place named Eltora on the Magdalena River. Anyhow, that's the story this cheap little crook asks us to believe to account for his arrival in one of the wildest and most remote parts of Mexico.'

Biggles was smiling. 'Tricky certainly has imagination if nothing else. Is there such a place in Mexico as Eltora?'

'Certainly. It's just south of the border. And as it's only a village, unless he had been there it's hard to see how he could have heard of the place. It's even harder to see how he could know as much about it as he does. He has all the details at his fingertips — what the people do, what they eat, drink, and all the rest of it. He couldn't have guessed that, and geography could hardly have been his long suit in what little schooling he had. So there he was, in what is perhaps the wildest part of Mexico, broke to the world. But luck was still with him. Now hold on to your chair, for this caps the lot. Who does he meet in

Eltora, of all places in the world, but — can you guess?’

‘No.’

‘His old pals, Ritzy, Corny and Nifty.’

Biggles flinched. ‘Now wait a minute, sir, wait a minute,’ he protested. ‘I’m a credulous sort of fellow and I know that coincidence can play strange tricks, but this is going too far.’

The Air Commodore was laughing softly. ‘I warned you to get a grip on yourself. That, of course, was no coincidence.’

‘You mean — he knew they were there.’

‘He must have done. The age of miracles has passed.’

‘What kills me is that Tricky should expect you to swallow such a fantastic yarn.’

‘He had the explanation ready. He says the local policeman picked him up for begging food. Being a foreigner who couldn’t speak the language, and had no passport, he was put into the one-room gaol to think of a better story than the one he was telling, which was that he was an Englishman who had been robbed and had lost his way. At least, that was what he tried to explain, for he knew no Spanish and the cop knew only a few words of American English. What the policeman — whose name he says was Juan something or other — did, was send for a local resident, who spoke both languages, to act as interpreter. That was Corny Cornelli. With him came Ritzy and Nifty. They bailed Tricky out — or more likely fixed things with the cop to let him go — and took him home. Maybe they were afraid he would talk. They had rented a nice little villa and were living very comfortably with everything laid on, including a female servant.’

Biggles lit another cigarette. ‘Can you really believe this wonderful tale?’

The Air Commodore shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘What do you really think?’

‘I believe that Tricky knew all along, or somehow found out, about this hide-out, and made his way there.’

‘For what reason?’

‘Not mere curiosity. Nor could it have been love. There could have been only one reason, the usual one with men of his type, money; money plus a fear that here he might be roped in for murder.’

‘Did he get any money?’

‘Not a bean.’

‘But what on earth were these crooks doing in Mexico?’

‘They had a reason for being where they were. I’ll come to that presently. Tricky says he stayed with the gang for a month. Then there was a row and he left them. My construction of that is, either they got sick of the sight of him and threw him out, or he pushed his demands for money too hard, possibly threatening blackmail, and had to bolt or risk being bumped off. I’d say he bolted. Somehow he got to Mexico City where, broke and homesick, he reported to the British office where he had the effrontery to try to do a deal.

He said he knew all about the diamond robbery and would spill the beans in return for a passage home and no prosecution. That didn't work. British officials don't make bargains with crooks. They got in touch with us. Being interested in the diamonds we asked them to give him a ticket home. We met him at the dock when he landed. Actually, we had nothing against him, but he was brought to the Yard where he told his story. Afterwards we let him go. He's still in London. We're keeping an eye on him.'

'How much did he know about the diamonds?'

'Plenty, if what he says is fact, not fiction.'

'How did he account for knowing about the diamonds?'

'He says he got the details from his cockney pal, Nifty, who, he swears, is fed up with the whole business and is pining for the homely smell of London, with fish and chips instead of the everlasting *tortillas* and *frijoles* he has to eat in Eltora.'

'So Nifty did some talking?'

'Yes. I told you that Ritzy had experience of boats in the Mediterranean. Knowing that if he got the diamonds his great difficulty would be to get them out of the country he planned accordingly. With the proceeds of a mail van robbery he bought a cabin cruiser which he kept at moorings in Chichester harbour. With this he intended to make for Tangier, where, as you know, almost anything can be bought or sold with no questions asked. There he had arranged to meet an agent with whom he had done some business, gun-running, in his smuggling days. With everything nicely worked out he got the diamonds and headed for Tangier the same night. All according to plan. This, you understand, is what Nifty told Tricky on the quiet one evening in Eltora, after a few drinks, when Ritzy was out of the way.'

Biggles nodded. 'It sounds reasonable.'

The Air Commodore went on. 'All went well until they reached the Bay of Biscay where they ran into bad weather. Then the engine broke down, and but for a stroke of luck that would have been the end of them and no one would ever have known what became of them or the diamonds. Unable to keep the boat's head to wind they were waterlogged when they had the good fortune to be picked up by a French tramp outward bound from Bordeaux to New Orleans,' The Air Commodore smiled. 'One can speculate on what might have happened if the skipper of the French boat had known that in Ritzy's soaking kitbag there was a fortune in diamonds. However, he was not to know that and in due course the ship docked at New Orleans. That was how Brabinsky and Co. got to the United States.'

'This is becoming fascinating,' murmured Biggles. 'Go on, sir.'

'Well, Brabinsky sold a diamond, and with the proceeds the party made its way to San Francisco. Ritzy thought that would be a safer place to lie low while fresh arrangements were being made. The appointment with the agent in Tangier had fallen through and another would have to be made. They still had the diamonds, and Ritzy was afraid that sooner or later the American

authorities would catch up with them and ask awkward questions. Had they been honest men they could of course have gone to the nearest British consul, but there was no question of that. Ritzy's fears were justified. He tried to sell another diamond, but the dealer was an honest man and the police were soon on the track. Ritzy told the tale about being shipwrecked, but the police were suspicious, and while they were checking his story he slipped across the border into Mexico. He daren't risk being searched. The party didn't go far.'

'So that's how they came to Eltora. Why did they stop there?'

'They didn't want to get too far from San Francisco. Ritzy had sent an air mail letter to the agent in Tangier explaining why he hadn't been able to keep the appointment. A reply came back making another date, this time in 'Frisco, with a man named Hugo Schultz, who would bring the cash with him to pay for the stones. It's hardly likely that a private individual would have that amount of money so we can assume that Schultz, probably a German from East Berlin, was the representative of the country to which the diamonds were going.'

'We can guess which country.'

'Of course. But again the appointment came unstuck. As I've said, Ritzy was getting nervous at carrying a load of diamonds around, living in hotels with nowhere to hide them, so he got into Mexico while the going was good.'

'Did he leave word for Schultz where he was going?'

'That's something we don't know. It was a question Tricky forgot to ask. We may suppose that he did, in which case he would have to wait in Eltora for Schultz to join him. Up to the time Tricky left the party Schultz hadn't turned up. One can see there would be difficulties. Schultz wouldn't find it easy to get perhaps a million dollars across the frontier into Mexico without awkward questions being asked. Time would be needed to arrange that. On the other hand, Ritzy and his pals would think twice about trying to get back into the States. They may have had British passports, but remember, they set out for Tangier, so it seems most unlikely that they would have visas for the United States. They may have been allowed ashore at New Orleans as shipwrecked sailors, but having got into Mexico the story wouldn't be likely to get them back into the States.'

'And Nifty, apparently, was getting browned off?'

'Very much so. He admitted they were all comfortable where they were, and had the local policeman in their pocket by means of small bribes, but not even Ritzy wanted to stay in Mexico indefinitely. Corny, too, was getting restless. He wanted to go home to South America, and Nifty, who was completely out of his element, was all for getting back to London. They asked Ritzy to split the diamonds three ways, leaving everyone to do as he liked. But Ritzy wouldn't do that, so we can well believe that the atmosphere was getting strained. Tricky went his own way to get something out of the business; he didn't get any money but at least he got home.'

'Ritzy still had the diamonds when he was there?'

‘So it seems. He had taken the precaution of hiding them. Only he knew where, so there was nothing the others could do about it unless they abandoned their share. Again, Ritzy knew he was in no danger of being bumped off as long as his partners didn’t know where he’d hidden the stones.’

‘I suppose there’s no chance of Ritzy selling the stones in Mexico?’ queried Biggles.

‘Not a hope. He might sell an odd one for ready money although Tricky says he seems to have plenty of cash in his pocket. To try to unload the whole parcel, or even a few, would be asking for trouble. The stones would soon be traced back to him and then the Mexican police would have some questions to ask. Well, as far as we know that’s how things stand at present, supposing that nothing has happened since Tricky left Mexico.’

‘How long ago is that?’

‘Nearly seven weeks.’

‘Anything could have happened in that time.’

‘We are well aware of it. That’s why the matter is urgent. Are they still there? Has Schultz arrived and collected the diamonds? Has the gang moved as a result of the row with Tricky, whom they might fear would rat on them, as in fact he has. Go to Mexico and find out. If they are still in the same place send me a cable, but not from Eltora in case the post office people talk. We can be sure Ritzy will be in touch with the post office for any news.’

‘Is that all?’

‘For the moment.’

‘Couldn’t the Mexican police find out for you if the gang is still in Eltora?’

‘No doubt they could, quite easily, but how could we expect them to take the matter seriously without telling them the whole story? The arrival of one policeman asking questions would be quite enough to send the gang packing. No, this must be done quietly. I’ve already explained the snags of extradition. Mexico, like every other country, has an interest in diamonds. Of course, if you could get hold of the stones well and good, but there could be no question of you making an arrest — anyway, in Mexico. If you could lure Ritzy over the border into the United States that would be fine. We can always rely on the co-operation of the police there. They wouldn’t want the diamonds to get into the wrong hands.’

Biggles looked curious. ‘Why am I picked for this job? Why not a regular officer of the yard?’

‘It would be risky. Remember, we’re dealing with professional crooks. They probably know all our men by sight. That’s part of their business. In any case, they can smell a copper a mile off. They’d take no notice of you, arriving as a casual traveller.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Meaning I don’t smell like a cop?’

‘Frankly, you don’t. You don’t even look like one. But never mind that. Tell me, what’s your opinion of the tale I’ve just told you?’

‘I think most of it is true. Ritzy is in Mexico.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘In the first place Tricky, not being a complete fool, must know you’ll check up on his story. To be proved an out-and-out liar wouldn’t improve his position in the case. Again, I feel that had the story been a pack of lies he would have concocted one more likely to be believed. Some of the details were quite unnecessary. For instance, why invent a name for the character Ritzy was supposed to meet in San Francisco? Hugo Schultz. There was no need for that; certainly not for a christian name.’

‘You believe he really exists?’

‘I do. He could be a Russian agent, as you say, probably from East Berlin. I wonder if von Stalhein knows anything about him? Where is he, by the way?’

‘Von Stalhein? He’s still in London.’

‘What’s he doing?’

‘Living quietly in rooms in Kensington while he waits for the fuss over his escape from Sakhalin to die down.’¹

‘What’s he doing for money?’

‘The last I heard he was making a living doing translations from Russian and German into English, mostly for government departments.’

‘Do they know who he is?’

‘Some may, although he’s changed his name to Lothar Boelke, anyway for the time being.’

‘You’ve got his address?’

‘Yes.’

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. ‘I’ve made a point of keeping away from him, but it might be worth a call to see if he knows anything about this fellow Hugo Schultz.’

‘There’s just a chance he may know him, or know of him, although Schultz is a common name in Germany; and, of course, it could be an alias.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I’ll try it. By the way, I take it you have descriptions of Ritzy and his pals?’

‘Yes. As they have done time you’ll find photos and fingerprints of Brimshawe and Cornelli downstairs.’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘I can see a snag about going to Mexico. I know enough Spanish to get along as a tourist, but perhaps not enough to deal with official arguments should they arise. I haven’t had to speak Spanish for some time.’

‘Polish it up on the way out. Travelling as a tourist, as I suggest you do, you’ll have time on your hands. Anyhow, as Eltora isn’t a great way from the border you’ll probably find that most of the people you’re likely to come in contact with speak a certain amount of American English.’

‘Where exactly is Eltora?’

‘It’s only a little place tucked away in the north-west corner, about a hundred miles from the frontier with California. You’ll find it on large scale maps. The road runs south through Sonoyta. Playing your part as an ordinary

tourist I suggest you get a car in the States and drive down. There's no point in taking an aircraft across. You won't need one, and it's unlikely you'd find a place to put it down near Eltora. It's all pretty rough country. Oh, and by the way, you'd better not try to take a gun in. The import of arms is forbidden. You won't need one. All I want you to do at this stage is simply to find out if Ritzy and Co. are still at Eltora.'

'Okay, sir. I'm not anxious to clutter up my pockets with unnecessary hardware.'

'All right. Think it over but don't be too long. Time is precious. A delay could result in the final disappearance of the diamonds — if they haven't gone already. I suggest you fly out to San Francisco by the regular air services, and make your sortie, by car, from there.'

Biggles stubbed his cigarette and got up. 'As you say, sir. I'll be back presently.'

He left the room and returned to his own office.

'What's the gen?' asked Ginger.

Biggles smiled. 'Sit still and keep quiet and I'll shoot you the most improbable line you've ever heard in your lives,' he promised.

¹ See *Biggles Buries a Hatchet*.

CHAPTER 4

BIGGLES MAKES A CALL

THE following morning a taxi dropped Biggles outside the house in which von Stalhein was lying low after his spectacular escape from the Russian political prison of Onor, on the island of Sakhalin. Air Commodore Raymond had provided the address. He went up to the top floor and knocked on the door facing him, as he had been advised.

A well-remembered voice inside said: 'Who is it?'

'Bigglesworth.'

There was the sound of a key being turned. The door was opened, slowly at first, to reveal von Stalhein with an automatic in his hand. He put the gun in his pocket with a faint smile when he recognized his visitor. 'Come in, Bigglesworth,' he said quietly. 'Forgive my melodramatic reception but I take no chances with visitors.'

'I can understand that,' said Biggles, dryly.

He entered. Von Stalhein closed the door, locked it, and indicated one of the two chairs in the room. The other was at a table at which, judging from a pile of papers on it, he had evidently been working.

Biggles took the seat and considered his old enemy reflectively. He had not changed much although there was some grey in his hair and his face showed signs of what he had been through during his incarceration on the dreaded island. But he was as immaculate as ever, and Biggles smiled faintly as his eyes fell on a cigarette in a long holder smoking in the ash tray.

'How's Fritz?' he inquired.

'He was well the last I heard of him. He writes seldom. Correspondence could still be dangerous for both of us. As you probably know, he is now in West Berlin with his mother.'

Biggles nodded. 'I heard that.'

'It was not on his account, I imagine, that you came to see me?' prompted von Stalhein.

'No,' admitted Biggles. 'I came to ask you a question. I know I promised you that if you came to London there would be no strings attached to my helping you to escape — at least as far as I was concerned. I was thinking particularly of politics. This is different, but don't answer the question if you don't want to.'

'What is it?'

'Do you know a man, possibly an Iron Curtain agent, by the name of Hugo Schultz?'

'I know of three men of that name, but if you could tell me in what connection you are interested it might help me to identify the particular Schultz you have in mind.'

‘He would, I think, be an expert, or at least have some knowledge, of precious stones.’

‘Diamonds, for instance?’

‘Yes.’

‘There is a man named Hugo Schultz, although that probably is not his real name, who acts as an official valuer of diamonds. When I knew him he lived in Moscow, although his work took him all over the world.’

‘That sounds as if he’s my man. Can you tell me anything about him?’

Von Stalhein frowned. ‘I don’t like the idea of discussing men I met during my late employment.’

‘After what your late employers did to you I don’t think you need have any qualms about that,’ returned Biggles, grimly. ‘Whether you talk or not your late employers will reckon you’ll have spilt all the beans you have in your can.’

‘No doubt you are right in thinking that,’ conceded von Stalhein. ‘They judge such things as honour by their own standards.’

‘It’s news to me that they have any standards at all where honour is concerned,’ stated Biggles, with biting sarcasm. ‘I haven’t come here to toss bouquets, but it was because you had a standard they could never really have trusted you, and for that reason the way you finished up was inevitable.’

‘We needn’t go into that, but I think in fairness, before I say any more, you should tell me why you are inquiring about this man Schultz,’ answered von Stalhein.

‘Very well. That won’t take long. My case concerns a big diamond robbery in London some time ago. A caretaker was murdered. The crooks got away and are now on the other side of the Atlantic. The leader reckoned to sell the stones to a man in Tangier. We don’t know his name. It could have been Schultz, or a man associated with him. But that appointment went wrong. Another was made for San Francisco, with a man named Hugo Schultz. I’ve nothing against Schultz. I’m trailing the crooks, but I may bump into him. That’s all. As it’s a good thing to know your enemies I thought you might be able to give me a line on this fellow Schultz — what he looks like, what sort of man he is, how he works, and so on.’

‘Very well,’ agreed von Stalhein. ‘I’ll tell you as much as I know, which isn’t a great deal, for diamonds did not come within my province. I think I know your man, and I can tell you right away that he is a most unpleasant fellow. At the time I was associated with him he didn’t speak English very well, for which reason I once had to accompany him to the United States, ostensibly as an interpreter, and also, I fancy, as an escort, in case he bolted with the diamonds he went to buy. He improved his English later, and now, I believe, speaks it very well.’

Biggles smiled cynically. ‘Your people couldn’t have trusted him very far.’

‘They trust nobody. They can’t afford to.’

‘Was this diamond deal legitimate?’

‘I don’t know. Schultz got the diamonds and I returned with him to Moscow, much to his annoyance.’

‘Why was he annoyed?’

‘He suggested to me that we split the stones between us and kept them, saying they had been confiscated by Customs Officers.’

‘So he’s that sort,’ sneered Biggles. ‘I take it you wouldn’t play.’

‘I would not.’

‘Did you report this when you got to Moscow?’

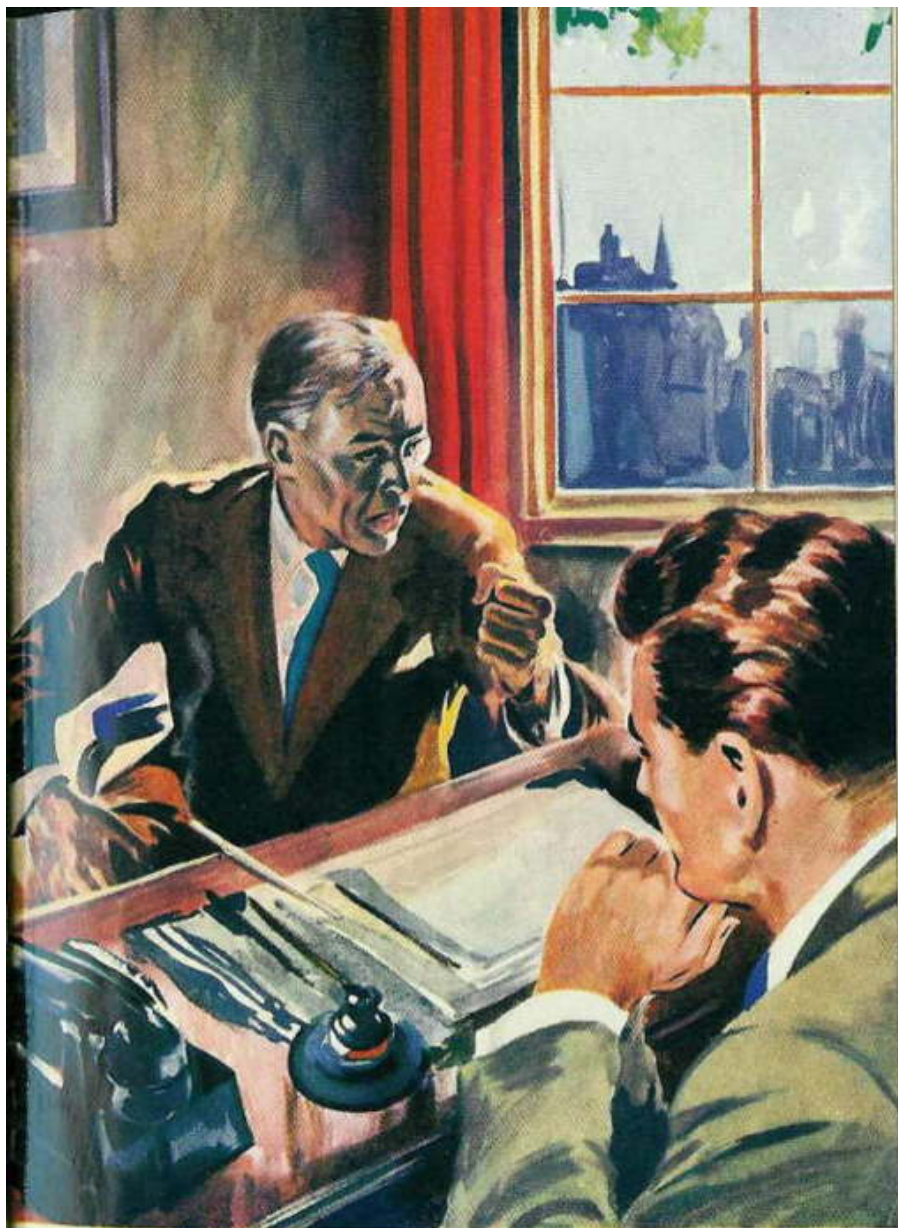
‘No’.

‘Why not?’

‘Schultz had friends in high places. I would have been sticking my neck out.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘I wonder you lasted as long as you did. But tell me. How *did* Schultz get the stones through Customs?’

‘He’s an expert smuggler. That’s one of the reasons why he was chosen for that, and similar jobs. He’d been doing it all his life. One day, many years ago, he made a bad mistake. He shot a French Customs man at Marseilles. He was caught and went to prison for life. When Germany occupied France in the last war he was released by the Gestapo who employed him on smuggling missions. After the war he fled to Russia where he had no difficulty in getting the sort of work at which, from long experience, he was an expert. He knows all the tricks. Also, he knows the shady corners of most of the big cities of the world like no other man I ever met. Apparently he is still going strong. Be careful of him. He’s a dangerous man.’



'He's a dangerous man,' said von Stalhein (page 45)

'In what way?'

'He carries a gun and is always ready to use it.'

'What is he like to look at?'

'He's about fifty now, tall and heavily built, clean-shaven, going bald in front. He's short sighted, for which reason he wears spectacles, and that, with a large round face and calm expression gives him the appearance of a rather

benevolent professor. In fact, one of his poses is as a Professor of Heidelberg University. He carries, of course, forged papers to support that. But you should easily recognize him because he has a deformity. As a young man he was involved in a car accident. One leg is now rather shorter than the other and when he walks he is inclined to drag it.'

'Thank you,' acknowledged Biggles. 'That information is most helpful. Anything else you can think of?'

'No. I think that's all. Oh, one little thing. One country he keeps clear of as far as possible is France. He has a fear that he might be recognized, in which case he would of course be arrested to finish his life sentence.'

Biggles got up. 'Well, I'm much obliged to you, von Stalhein. This fellow you've told me about may or may not be my man, but from his character he fits well into the picture.'

'Are you going to look for him?'

'No. If he has already collected the diamonds they will probably be in Russia by now.'

'If the stake was large enough he may have collected them — and kept them.'

'The value of the stones is reckoned to be in the order of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds.'

Von Stalhein pursed his lips. 'Very nice. That should be quite large enough. Indeed, this may be the chance he has been waiting for.'

'Chance for what?'

'To make his pile and get out.'

'You mean — out of Russia?'

'Yes.'

'Then he doesn't like it there.'

'No more than I did. But it has suited him to stay there, as for a time it suited me. Remember this. Russian agents are not just let loose with vast sums of money in their pockets. They are watched. As I have told you, on one such mission Schultz was watched by me, although officially I was supposed to be improving his English.'

'I'll bear it in mind,' said Biggles, thoughtfully. 'Now I'll be getting along. I have already taken up a lot of your time. Is there anything I can do for you?'

'No thank you. I manage very well. It is very pleasant here after Onor. I have just received a long book to translate which will keep me going for some time.'

'Who from?'

'Air Commodore Raymond.'

Biggles smiled. 'He must be trying to keep you out of mischief.'

Von Stalhein smiled wanly. 'He needn't worry about that. No man who has seen the inside of a Russian political prison takes a chance on going back. How are your three able assistants?'

'They're very well, thanks. I think they miss you. Life has been rather dull

for them since you came over to our side of the fence.'

'There may be plenty for them to do when the vacancy caused by my retirement has been filled,' said von Stalhein, seriously.

Biggles walked to the door. 'Well, good-bye for now. I shall be going abroad for a little while but I'll look you up when I get back.'

'I shall be interested to hear if you encountered Schultz,' said von Stalhein as he opened the door.

Smiling whimsically, Biggles went down to the street, called a taxi, and returned to his office.

He found his staff awaiting his return with a curiosity which was pardonable in the circumstances.

'Did you find him in?' asked Ginger.

'Yes,' answered Biggles, hanging up his hat and going to his chair behind the desk.

'Still as frosty as ever?'

'No. He's gradually thawing out.'

'You know, old boy, this getting all pals together with old Erich takes a bit of getting used to,' said Bertie, automatically polishing his monocle with a handkerchief. 'Did he give you any gen on this guy Schultz?'

'More than I expected. He seems to be a nasty piece of work.'

'And what's the drill now?' inquired Algy.

'I shall go to Mexico with Ginger as soon as I can get reservations.'

'Why only Ginger?'

'I can't see what there would be for four of us to do. We don't want to look like an invading army.'

'Oh, dash that for a tale,' protested Bertie. 'Don't hog all the fun for yourself. Let us go with you as far as 'Frisco. I've heard so much about the place I'd like to see it. Besides, I might be useful, you never know.'

'That goes for me too,' put in Algy.

'All right, if that's how you feel,' conceded Biggles. 'Ritzy may have gone back to San Francisco to meet Schultz there; so there's no harm in you having a look round for them while I go on to Eltora with Ginger. We shouldn't be away long. It might be a good thing for one of you to be always available on the phone in case I should need help. As you say, one never knows.'

'How are you going about this?' asked Algy.

'My idea is to follow in the track of Tricky Adamson. That is to say, in San Francisco or Los Angeles I shall buy a car, probably a second-hand one since we shan't need it for very long. In it Ginger and I will cross the border and make our way to Eltora. There I shall arrange a breakdown to provide an excuse for delay and try to locate the gang. It's only a small place, so that shouldn't take long. I'm working on the assumption that Ritzy is still there. If he's gone we shall have to try to follow him.'

'You won't know if he still has the diamonds,' said Algy.

'If he's still in Eltora I shall reckon he still has the stones, because if he's

disposed of them he would have no reason for staying in such a dead-and-alive hole. If he's gone I shall, as I say, try to find out which way he went. It would probably be to San Francisco, to meet Schultz. I'd keep you and Bertie posted about my movements, of course. You might have to look for Schultz in 'Frisco, or find out if he's been and gone. But we'll deal with that when the time comes.' Biggles walked over to a map that lay open on the table.

'According to Tricky,' he went on, 'he crossed the border at Sonoyta and had to abandon the car on a secondary road soon afterwards. It was a Ford with a Californian number plate. That's the road I intend to take in which case we shall arrive in Eltora as he did, although not, I hope, in the same state. But that's enough for now. Let's get organized.'

CHAPTER 5

ELTORA

How Biggles and Ginger came to be in a country so far removed from their usual zone of operations having been explained, the story can proceed.

The flight out to San Francisco by the regular services had been without incident. From there, leaving Algy and Bertie to await instructions, they had continued on to Los Angeles, where Biggles had bought a second-hand car, a Studebaker, that appeared to be in good order. Still working to the plan, he and Ginger had gone on to the frontier town of Sonoyta where, if there was any truth in Tricky Adamson's story, he had entered Mexico.

There had been some pointed questions at the Customs offices on both sides of the border. Not only were their passports checked and stamped but their baggage was thoroughly searched. This may have been normal procedure. Biggles didn't inquire. When questioned as to why he was crossing the border the reason he gave was that he was looking for a location for some film shots. This, perhaps, because they were no great distance from Hollywood, was accepted. So the Studebaker had gone on its way, on a road that had quickly deteriorated, with what result has been narrated in an earlier chapter.

Stranded, still in doubt as to whether they were on the right road, Biggles and Ginger passed an uncomfortable night. Ginger was bitten on the hand by an insect of some sort and the irritation kept him awake most of the time. At dawn, stiff and cold, for the thin desert air was bitterly cold at that hour, they shook themselves and prepared to walk to the top of the hill to see what lay beyond. There was, of course, no question of washing, or otherwise making any sort of toilet.

'We shall arrive looking like a couple of hobos,' muttered Ginger, disgustedly.

'No matter what we look like, let's get there,' replied Biggles. 'We shall feel better after some food and a drink.'

As it happened they did not have to walk up the hill. As they were about to start, over the brow came a large party of Indians, men, women and children, clad in garments of the most brilliant colours.

'Our luck's in,' said Biggles. 'They must have been to Eltora, shopping. They may give us a hand.'

The crowd hurried forward to the car, which seemed to amuse them. They stopped to look. Biggles asked them how far it was to Eltora, and was informed, to his relief, that it was in the valley beyond the hill. It did not occur seriously to him that this motley but cheerful crowd would be able to help them in a practical way. The most he hoped for was that one of them would go to Eltora and advise the local garage, assuming there was one, of their

predicament. But the Indians, who seemed to take the situation as a joke, had their own ideas of how to handle it: they crowded round the car and started to push. Seeing what they were trying to do Biggles jumped into the driving seat and started the engine to give them as much help as possible. It was enough.

Seeing the car moving Ginger got in beside Biggles and with much cheering reached the top of the gradient. A girl gave him a tomato. He took it gratefully, for his mouth was parched.

Biggles thanked these kind people, and to cries of *adios* and *gracias* allowed the car to begin coasting down a long slope towards their destination, which could be seen nestling among orchards, palms and cultivated fields, in a valley through which ran a river.

‘Thank goodness we can see houses again,’ said Ginger in a relieved voice. ‘I was getting worried. What’s the drill now we’re here?’

‘First we’d better find somewhere to park ourselves, take a bath if there’s one available, and have something to eat. Then we’ll look for a garage to see if anything can be done about the car. It’s no earthly use as it is.’

‘According to Tricky he must have arrived looking very much as we do.’

‘I intended to fake a breakdown to give us an excuse for staying here a little while, but as things have turned out that won’t be necessary,’ said Biggles. ‘We may be here longer than I reckoned on.’

The car cruised to the bottom of the hill and ran on into the village street.

Eltora now revealed itself to be two straggling rows of flat-roofed, whitewashed adobe houses built on either side of a dusty track on which a mangy cur sat scratching itself. A few scrawny fowls hopefully examined the dry earth. An occasional cottonwood tree offered a welcome patch of shade. There was a little general shop and a hardware store, indicated by sundry pots and pans outside the door. Beside them in a chair sat a gaunt, lean old man with a face the colour of leather. With a hooked nose he looked rather like a dying bird of prey.

Dirty and dilapidated though the *pueblo* looked as a whole, there were a few places where, after the sterile *mesa* beyond the hill, it was more like a miniature paradise, notably in the gardens of the few detached villas. Grapevines hung on the trellises that screened *patios* and verandas. Scarlet tomatoes glowed like little balls of fire in clearings protected by fences of green cactus. Yellow gourds sprawled in a riot of flowers, some, such as dahlias and nasturtiums, familiar, others unknown. Orange groves could be seen beyond. There were some patches of maize, half smothered by weeds. High up in a dead eucalyptus tree, its bark peeling in long untidy strips, a group of buzzards sat hunched in the fast-mounting heat of the sun.

By a pump, against a hitching rail to which he had tethered a wiry-looking pony, leaned a handsome young man, swarthy, on his head an enormous silver-braided sombrero. He wore an embroidered shirt, open at the throat, and leather chaps. His boots were heeled with long-rowelled spurs. A cartridge belt hung on his hips, a pearl-handled revolver projecting from the holster.

Over his shoulder had been thrown a red *sarape*.¹ A black-papered cigarette smouldered between his lips. His expression, as his dark eyes rested on the newcomers, while not hostile was not exactly friendly.

Biggles nudged Ginger. 'Everything seems to be laid on for you,' he bantered. 'Here's your gunman. Ask him if he can knock the spots out of the six of spades.'

'Not me,' retorted Ginger. 'He wouldn't see the joke. From the expression on his face, if he thought I was pulling his leg he might knock the spots off me.'

Biggles stopped the car and got out. '*Buenos dias, señor*,' he greeted. 'Can you tell me the way to the best hotel?'

The man replied as politely, but the expression on his face did not change. '*Buenos dias, señores*.' He pointed a little way down the street to a house that rose a trifle above the others. He went on in English with an American accent. The *Casa Grande*, the local *posada*² is the only place here where you will find accommodation.'

Biggles thanked him, and as he went on towards the building indicated Ginger remarked: 'He seemed to be peeved about something.'

'If he was it had nothing to do with us,' answered Biggles.

He stopped at the *posada*. A sign over the door carried its name. *Casa Grande* — the big house.

On the *patio*, under a screen of woven reeds, seated in wicker chairs two men were engaged in earnest conversation. There was a small table between them. On the table were two glasses and a bottle.

One of the men was a corpulent individual, very dark, with piggy eyes and a flowing black moustache. Ginger took him to be a *mestizo*, half Spanish, half Indian. He was hatless, in his shirt sleeves, and wore a crimson cummerbund round his middle. The other was younger, perhaps thirty, slim, clean-shaven, with longish hair, brushed flat, as black as the wing of a raven. He, too, was dark, although not as dark as his companion, and had it not been for the well-cut suit he wore he, too, might have been born in the country. Ginger suspected he might be an American.

Apparently Biggles thought that, for having got out of the car he spoke to him in English. 'Excuse me, but is this the hotel?'

The answer came back in the same language. 'This is the local pub, if that's what you mean.'

'Can we get a meal here?'

'Such as it is.'

'And a bed?'

'Are you thinking of staying here?' The man seemed surprised.

'We've no alternative,' Biggles told him. 'We've broken down. We were stuck out on the desert, and would have been there now had it not been for some friendly Indians who pushed us up the hill.'

'What's the trouble?'

‘The clutch has gone. Is there a garage or a repair station here?’

‘No. You might get some petrol. Old Lorenzo, over the road, usually keeps a few cans in his store.’ The man indicated the old Mexican with the hooked nose, sitting outside his shop.

‘He doesn’t stock spares?’

‘A few nuts and bolts is as far as he goes. There wouldn’t be much demand for spare parts here.’

‘Are you an American?’ asked Biggles, somewhat bluntly.

The man smiled faintly. ‘More or less.’

By this time the other man had stood up and donned a faded uniform cap. He now approached the visitors with an air of authority.

‘Where have you come from?’ he asked, pompously.

‘We’ve just come from the United States,’ Biggles told him.

‘Americanos, eh?’

‘No. We’re English.’

‘*Ca*. What are you doing here?’

Biggles stuck to the rôle he had decided to play. Obviously no man would go to Eltora without a reason.

‘We’re looking for some local colour for film locations.’

‘Is that so? Well, I am the police. Your passports, please.’

Biggles and Ginger produced the little blue books embossed with the arms of the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

The officer studied them closely. In particular, he compared the photographs on page three longer than was necessary — or so it seemed to Ginger. Then he said, curtly: ‘These are not in order. You must come with me to the police-station.’

Biggles frowned. ‘They’re in perfect order. As you can see, they were stamped by your people at Sonoyta.’

At this the other man stepped in. ‘Have you just come from Sonoyta?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Did you by any chance see a blue Cadillac there, or on the way?’

‘No. The only car we saw was the wreck of an old Ford beside the track.’

The man smiled, a curious knowing smile, which left Ginger wondering what he knew about it.

Said Biggles, turning to the policeman and trying to keep calm, for he knew the folly of getting wrong with the authorities in a foreign country: ‘What do you want us to do at the police-station?’

‘You must stay there while I send to Hermosillo for permits.’

‘Permits for what?’

‘Permission to stay in the country.’

‘We have that already.’

‘The passports must bear the stamp of police headquarters at Hermosillo.’

‘Why Hermosillo?’

‘It is the capital of the state.’

‘How long is this going to take?’

The policeman shrugged. ‘Who knows?’

Biggles looked at the other man. ‘Is this the usual procedure?’

‘If Juan says so. You can’t argue with the law,’ was the smiling reply. The speaker seemed amused, as if enjoying a private joke.

But Ginger didn’t smile. The name Juan struck his memory like a gong. According to Tricky that was the name of the policeman at Eltora. He couldn’t possibly have known that unless he had been there, so here was further proof of his story.

‘How much money have you got?’ the policeman asked.

‘Not more than I shall need,’ answered Biggles, evasively.

‘Just a minute,’ the other man broke in again, looking at Biggles, still with amused tolerance. ‘You’re new to Mexico, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve never been here before,’ replied Biggles.

‘Then let me put you wise. Haven’t you tumbled to what all this is about?’

‘No.’

‘Juan is after a tip. There’s nothing unusual in that. The cops in places like this are pretty poorly paid. Slip him twenty dollars and you’ll have no more trouble.’

So this, too, was what happened to Tricky, thought Ginger. In his case, having no money, Ritzy had come to the rescue.

Although it went against the grain Biggles realized the wisdom of the advice. The last thing he wanted was to get wrong with the police, so he took the notes from his case and handed them over.

The effect was instantaneous. The policeman beamed. ‘*Gracias, señor,*’ he acknowledged.

‘Now what about some accommodation?’ requested Biggles.

‘*Que desea Vd., señor?*’

‘I need a bath, food and a bed,’ said Biggles.

The policeman yelled, ‘Pepe.’

While they were waiting for the innkeeper to appear there was an incident which, while trivial, did not escape Ginger’s notice. The good-looking Mexican they had seen up the street came past on his horse at walking pace. Drawing level he half reined in. The man who had advised Biggles to give the policeman money stiffened and rose, his hand moving towards his pocket. The lips of the rider curled in a sneer and he went on. It was the expression on his face that registered with Ginger. The policeman, he also noticed, had been quick to step out of line.

There the matter ended, for at this juncture the innkeeper appeared. He was a plump, greasy-looking little man with a thin, black moustache, that drooped at the ends. He was dressed in a grey shirt, dirty cotton trousers and, on his feet, a pair of slip-shod sandals.

Juan waved a lordly hand, talking volubly. ‘Take care of them,’ he ordered.

‘*Si, señor.*’ The innkeeper fetched the two suitcases from the car, looked at

the visitors and beckoned. 'Come, *señores*,' he said.

Ginger observed that his eyes kept flashing to the retreating figure of the mounted Mexican.

With Biggles he followed their host into the hotel, stepping over an endless column of red ants that marched across the doorway.

They were shown the bathroom first, either because it was on the ground floor or because Pepe was proud of having such a convenience. Actually, it was a primitive affair just outside the back door, a tin bath, surrounded by a ragged curtain, fed from a pump over a rain-water tank. They were warned to be careful with the water, which was in short supply, the rains being very late. It was a long way to fetch water from the river, and even that was low. If the rain didn't come soon it would be a serious matter for everyone.

There was no one else staying at the inn so they were offered a choice of three bedrooms reserved for guests, two double and one single. Biggles decided on a double room overlooking the street. The furnishings could not have been more simple. They comprised two iron bedsteads with coverings that could have been much cleaner, a plaited cane wardrobe, a chair falling to pieces and a deal table with a wash-basin on it.

The choice having been made Pepe brought in their suitcases and then left them.

Biggles turned serious eyes to Ginger's face. 'Talk about history repeating itself,' he said quietly. 'Did you recognize that fellow on the *patio*?'

Ginger's eyebrows went up. 'No.'

'Neither did I at first, although there was something familiar about his face. Then the penny dropped and I got it. He's shaved off his moustache and grown sidewhiskers: he's thinner than he was and put on some extra sun tan; but I'm sure I'm right.'

'Who is he?'

'Corny Cornelli, one of Ritzy's partners.'

'Then Ritzy must still be here.'

'That's how it looks.'

'What was that talk about a blue Cadillac?'

'I fancy Corny was waiting for it to arrive. That's what he was doing downstairs. The car might belong to the gang, or to Schultz, coming from the States. I don't know. But we may, before long. We shall have to play our cards carefully. One sniff of suspicion as to who we really are and anything could happen. Obviously Corny and that cop are as thick as thieves.'

'I'll tell you this,' returned Ginger, throwing off his clothes for a bath. 'Corny may be a pal of the cop, but there's no love lost between him and that smart cowboy.'

'So I noticed. No doubt we shall learn what that's about, too, in due course.'

'Are you going to cable the Air Commodore, to let him know that Corny's here?'

‘No. Anyway, not from here. It would be too risky. If Ritzy has the police in his pocket you can bet he’s well in with the post office, too.’

‘You might send a message in code.’

‘That in itself would look suspicious. We might find ourselves arrested as spies, or something of the sort. But we can talk about this later. Let’s get some of the dirt off ourselves and go down for a meal.’

In this manner did Biggles and Ginger arrive in Eltora.

¹ Long blanket-like shawl, often brightly colored and fringed at the ends, worn in Mexico, especially by men.

² Inn

CHAPTER 6

RITZY CALLS

FOR Ginger the next hour was comparative luxury. He had shaken from his clothes and shoes the sand that had been rasping his skin. He had had a bath in water that was tepid, and did not look too clean; but he was in no mood to be particular. He had had a satisfying although not very palatable meal of tough cold meat, undercooked rice and *tortillas*, Mexico's substitute for bread, made of corn soaked overnight and then ground into a paste. This, patted into flat cakes, very thin, is fried in an ungreased tin. These pancakes are filling, but at first rather hard to digest. Ginger could well understand Nifty getting tired of them and pining for good bread with fish and chips. The coffee was thin, insipid stuff. However, there was nothing apparently wrong with the delicious fruit that ended the repast.

'Go steady with those plums,' warned Biggles, as Ginger tucked into them. 'Take a tip from me; in a place like this stick to fruit that has a peel on it, like oranges and bananas. When that's taken off you know what is inside is clean. Flies may have been on those plums and grapes, and you don't know where the flies have been. Nor do you know if the hands that picked the fruit were clean. It's easy to get a dose of dysentery, and if you do you won't forget it in a hurry.'

Knowing that Biggles was speaking from experience Ginger took his advice.

They had of course discussed the situation. Biggles' immediate worry was the car, for unless they could get it repaired on the spot, the chance of which from all accounts seemed remote, they would be without transport. They were fairly well provided with money, but hadn't enough on them to buy a new car even if one was available. It looked, Biggles said, as if they might have to call on Algy and Bertie for help. This, he thought, could be done without arousing suspicion, but he did not want to do that at this stage. He also contemplated sending them a telegram, in cryptic terms which they would understand, telling them that the men they sought were still at Eltora and asking them to pass on the information to the Air Commodore. A letter would be safer, but he had no idea how long it would take to reach San Francisco. He said he would make inquiries about the posts.

For the moment, the first thing was to learn their way about, at the same time hoping that news of Ritzy would come their way without them having to make direct inquiries. Corny knew that two Englishmen had arrived, so that it was reasonable to suppose Ritzy would soon hear about it, in which case he might be expected at the hotel to find out who they were and what they were doing in such an out-of-the-way corner of Mexico.

Biggles had his story ready and had primed Ginger as to the form it would

probably take. In short, he hoped that the information he really wanted, which was why the three crooks were still in Eltora, would sooner or later be volunteered by one of them. The important thing was, it was already clear that Tricky's story of having been in Eltora was true in substance, no matter how far he had distorted the facts to suit himself. So when they went out to the *patio* it was really to allow events to take their course. As Biggles put it, there was no need for them to take their fences until they came to them.

As they walked through the dingy, ant-infested little hall, they could hear Pepe, the proprietor, talking to a woman, presumably his wife. He seemed to be laying down the law and spoke too fast for Ginger to make much of the conversation; but three names were mentioned several times, and about one of them there could be no mistake. It was Cornelli. The others were José and Margarita. When the conversation broke off, Biggles, who had paused, walked on.

'Cornelli must be here under his proper name,' said Ginger quietly.

'He couldn't use a false one unless he's carrying a false passport,' answered Biggles. 'He'd be checked when he entered the country. Remember how they went over us at the frontier. Anyway, as he isn't known here there would appear to be no reason why he shouldn't use his own name, and the same with the other two.'

'Did you get what Pepe was carrying on about?'

'Part of it. It had nothing to do with us. There seems to be a woman in the case. Cornelli is involved, and another man José. Pepe was predicting trouble, and if Cornelli is fooling about with a local girl, and her father or her boy friend take exception to it, there might well be trouble brewing.'

'From what I've read the people in these parts can be handy with their knives.'

'As long as they don't stick 'em into us, and I shall do my best not to provide an excuse, we needn't worry,' said Biggles, lightly, as they stopped on the *patio* to survey the dusty, sun-soaked street. There was not a soul about.

'It looks pretty warm out there,' remarked Ginger.

'I imagine that's why most people are indoors,' replied Biggles. 'We'll just take a turn to get our bearings.'

'You don't think there's any risk of you being recognized if we should happen to run into any of the gang?'

'No. That's why I was sent here. I'm sure Cornelli didn't recognize me so that should go for the others. After all, we haven't had much to do with professional criminals in their particular line of operations.'

They walked the length of the street without seeing anyone except one or two elderly women gossiping as they did their shopping at the open window of the little store. Ginger caught a snatch of conversation as they passed. A name they had already heard was mentioned. It was José.

'This fellow José, whoever he is, seems to be in the news,' murmured

Ginger.

There was no garage, but Biggles spoke to the old man Lorenzo, mentioned by Corny as having petrol. It was learned that he had some petrol, not much, and also that he claimed to be a *mecánico*; but he had no spare parts, so there was nothing he could do about the *embrague* — the clutch. He helped them to push the car, which was still standing as they had left it outside the inn, into the shade of some trees.

As there was nothing more they could do Biggles and Ginger walked back to the *patio* to get out of the blazing sun. There, in chairs, they made themselves as comfortable as hordes of flies would allow and resumed the subject of how they could get over the transport difficulty, now threatening to be a serious obstacle in Biggles' plan.

'We should be in a mess if it became necessary for us to get away from here in a hurry,' said Biggles, frowning. 'One thing is certain, there could be no question of *walking* across that blistering desert back to the States. There may be a regular service by another route. We'll find out. But that wouldn't be like having a car of our own, which would make us independent.'

'I can see a car coming now,' observed Ginger, sitting up to look. 'If it's going to the States it might take a message through for us.'

The car, a roomy Overland, carrying a United States registration plate, came to a stop in front of the hotel. Two men in white duck suits, one spotless and the other not so clean, got out and strolled up to the *patio*. The smart one Ginger recognized at once. He was Ritzy Brabinsky. The other, he suspected, was Nifty Brimshawe, although he had altered his appearance somewhat. He now wore a straggling hay-coloured moustache. But he was typical of a certain kind of cockney, thin-faced, sharp-featured, with quick, alert movements and eyes that were never still. He reminded Ginger of a weasel.

Ritzy nodded and dropped into a vacant chair. 'Good morning to you,' he said cheerfully. 'We don't often have visitors here, but a friend of mine told me two had arrived so I've dropped in to see if we could be of any help. I understand you're having a little trouble.'

'Yes, thanks,' confirmed Biggles. 'We're having more than a little trouble. Our car's broken down and it seems there's nothing we can do about it. My friend and I were sitting here wondering how we were going to get back to the States.'

'In a hurry?'

'Not particularly. Our time's our own, but we don't want to sit here stewing in our own juice for longer than is necessary.'

'You're English, I believe?'

'That's right.'

'What brought you to this out-of-the-way hole?'

'Oh, business.'

'Films, I hear.'

'We wanted to have a look at the real Mexico and Eltora was suggested as

a place where we might find it.'

'Whoever told you that was right.'

'Well, we've got here, but we're now faced with the problem of getting back across the border. Getting anywhere, if it comes to that. Can you suggest anything?'

'What's the trouble with your car?'

'The clutch has gone. It was slipping a bit when I started and I finished it off grinding through the sand on that abominable desert road.'

Ritzzy shook his head. 'To get a new clutch sent here by the makers would take time, and even if you got one I doubt if anyone local would be able to fit it. It's impossible here to get anything done in a hurry, anyway. Time means nothing. Your best chance would be to get a lift to the railway at Hermosillo by someone passing through, although that doesn't often happen. There's a better road between Hermosillo and the border.'

To do that would mean abandoning my car.'

'I'm afraid so, but you might come back for it later.'

'You're not likely to be going to Hermosillo yourself?'

'No. I'd run you in, but it happens that I'm waiting for a friend to arrive from the States and it's important that I should be here to meet him. He should be here any time now. In fact, he's overdue.'

'Is he likely to be going back to the States after he's finished his business with you?'

'Probably, although there's a chance he may go on to Mexico City.'

'He might give me a lift.'

'I could ask him.'

'Thanks. That's very kind of you. I take it you live here?'

'Yes. I share a little villa on the outskirts of the village with two friends. Look in sometime and have a drink. You can't miss it. About a quarter of a mile down the road on the right. The name's Los Palmeras. It's on the gate.'

'What on earth do you find to do here?'

'That's what they call a leading question, but between ourselves I have reason to believe there's oil under the sand. But to locate the stuff and then get a concession to work it are two very different things.'

'Can I get you a drink?' asked Biggles.

'The beer is warm and the coffee Pepe makes is undrinkable. Orange juice is the only thing. I'll have one with you with pleasure. In this heat one drinks all the time.'

Biggles shouted for Pepe, and when he came ordered orange juice all round.

'Was it your other friend who was here, talking to the local policeman, when we rolled up?' asked Biggles, while they were waiting.

'That's right.'

'He was helpful. Tipped us off how to put ourselves on the right side of the law.'

‘So he told me.’ Ritzy glanced around and lowered his voice. ‘Have you much money on you?’

‘Not a great lot — why?’

‘Keep your hand on it. Money here has a knack of disappearing unaccountably.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ returned Biggles, as Pepe put the drinks on the table and shuffled back indoors.

Ritzy raised his glass. ‘Well, here’s luck, mister... I don’t think I heard your name?’

‘Bigglesworth. My friend here is Hebblethwaite.’

‘Bigglesworth. Rather an odd name,’ murmured Ritzy. ‘I heard it once before though. I believe there’s a fellow of that name at Scotland Yard — something to do with aviation. Would he be a relation of yours?’

Biggles’ expression did not change. He shook his head. ‘As far as I know I haven’t a relation in the world,’ he answered casually. ‘Come to that I don’t think you told me your name.’

‘Brabinsky. Nicolas Brabinsky. British by naturalization. My friend here is Sam Brimshawe. The man you met this morning was Charlie Cornelli.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Thanks, now we know each other.’

Ritzy rose. ‘Well, we must be getting along. Be seeing you again before long, no doubt.’

With that the two men departed, going back the way they came.

After they had gone Ginger turned serious eyes to Biggles’ face. ‘That was a bit shattering,’ he breathed. ‘He knows you.’

‘No. He knows *of* me. Being what he is he has probably heard someone mention my name. Don’t worry. He didn’t recognize me. If he had the conversation would have been entirely different.’

‘He doesn’t seem to be a bad sort of fellow.’

‘Don’t let his charming manners deceive you,’ said Biggles. ‘He had one purpose in coming here. He wanted to have a look at us, to size us up. He’s a crook, and as such must keep his eyes open all the time. We’ve learnt more about him than he has about us. We know he’s still here, which is important because it means he hasn’t been able to get rid of the stones. They’re still about here, somewhere. He’s expecting Schultz, or another agent, to arrive and collect them. If my guess is right he’ll turn up in a blue Cadillac. That could only mean Schultz has been in touch with Ritzy or he wouldn’t know details of the car.’

‘I suppose we couldn’t locate the stones by watching him?’

‘Not a hope. He won’t go near them. Remember what Tricky said. He’s been well on the beam so far, so the rest of his statement might also be true. According to him, Ritzy has hidden the stones. The other two don’t know where they are. That’s why they’re still here. They’re not going to give up their share of the swag if they can help it. The chances are they haven’t any money, anyway. Ritzy keeps a tight hand on the cash.’

‘He’s here under his own name.’

‘As I told you, it couldn’t very well be otherwise. If he used any name other than the one on his passport he might get into trouble with the authorities. It’s unlikely they’d let him cross the frontier.’

‘What if this fellow arrives in the blue Cadillac and offers to give you a lift to the States?’

‘That would suit fine. I’d jump at the chance because, assuming the deal with Ritzy goes through, we should be travelling with the diamonds. The crooks could be picked up at any time if they tried to leave the country. The next thing I want is to have a quiet word with Nifty. Tricky says he’s fed up with being here and that I can well believe. He might be in the mood to talk.’

‘If he doesn’t know where the diamonds are I don’t see how he could tell us anything we don’t already know.’

‘He may know something about Ritzy’s immediate plans. He may know who is coming in the Cadillac, for instance. We’ll just sit quiet and wait for the next move. If nothing happens within the next day or two we’ll accept Ritzy’s invitation and call at his villa for a drink and another chat.’

Ginger puckered his forehead. ‘What strikes me as odd is this; I can’t see Ritzy parting with the stones unless he receives payment for them. I mean, payment in cash. He wouldn’t be likely to accept payment by cheque from a man he might never see again. A cheque can be stopped at the bank. Ritzy’s confidence in this dealer, Schultz, or whoever it might be, wouldn’t go as far as that. He must know that once he parts with those diamonds he’ll never see them again.’

‘Well?’

‘Can you see Schultz travelling in this sort of country with a quarter of a million dollars on his person? After all, Schultz knows he’s dealing with a thief. What’s to stop Ritzy bumping him off and taking the money? If he did that he’d have both the money and the stones.’

‘I’ve thought of that,’ answered Biggles. ‘I can only suppose that Schultz knows what he’s doing. Anyhow, it’s no use trying to guess the answer. We may know in due course. Another mystery is why Schultz is overdue, as apparently he is. No doubt these things will sort themselves out in time. For the short while we’ve been here we’ve done pretty well.’

CHAPTER 7

MURDER BY MOONLIGHT

THE remainder of the daylight hours passed quietly. The heat was formidable and discouraged walking except for short distances. Everywhere, indoors and outdoors, flies filled the air with a continuous hum, and were a constant irritation.

Biggles walked as far as the post office and returned to say there were no telegraph facilities. That settled any argument about that. Instead, more in hope than confidence that it would reach its destination he wrote a carefully worded letter to Algy in San Francisco notifying him of their arrival and that they were without transport owing to their car breaking down. In Eltora, he concluded, they had found what they were looking for.

‘Algy will understand that means Ritzy and Co.,’ said Biggles, as he handed the letter to Ginger to post.

‘How long will this take to get there?’ asked Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. The old woman who runs the post office hadn’t a clue.’

In the late afternoon, as they sat on the *patio* still discussing the situation, who should appear but Nifty.

‘I wonder what *he* wants,’ said Biggles softly. ‘He hasn’t just come to see if we’re still here, you can bet your boots on that.’

Nifty joined them and at Biggles’ invitation accepted a glass of wine. Biggles waited for him to open up the conversation. It seemed to Ginger that he wanted to say something but didn’t know how to begin, or maybe was afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Biggles tried a little prompting. ‘Have you been here long?’ he asked.

‘Too long,’ answered Nifty. He spoke crisply, with a pronounced cockney accent.

‘If you don’t like it here why do you stay?’

‘I’ve got some business to finish. Besides, till our pal from the States shows up I’m a bit short of ready cash. Matter of fact I was wondering how you were fixed.’

‘Sorry,’ said Biggles. ‘We shall only have just enough money to see us through this trip, particularly in view of what’s happened to our car.’

Nifty nodded. ‘I was afraid you’d say that.’

‘You’d need a tidy sum if you were thinking of going to England.’

‘I reckon so. I shall be all right for dough presently, when our pal rolls up. He should have been here some time ago. Can’t think what’s keeping him. Lost his way, I shouldn’t wonder. This is a heck of a place to find. If he got off the road he might end up anywhere.’

‘Suppose he doesn’t come at all?’

‘That’s what I’m scared of,’ growled Nifty. ‘Something must have gone wrong or he’d have been ‘ere by now.’

‘What about your friend at the villa — what’s his name again?’

‘Brabinsky.’

‘Is he in the same boat?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s got a car. Why doesn’t he go to the States and find out what’s happened to the man you’re waiting for?’

‘It ain’t as easy as that. I don’t want to go back to the States, neither does Ritzy.’

‘Who?’

‘Ritzy. That’s my pal’s nickname. The fact is,’ went on Nifty in a burst of confidence, ‘we ‘ad a spot o’ trouble when we was there — and, well, you know how it is.’

Nifty, who may have felt that he was saying too much, fell silent.

The sun set in a cauldron of fire, staining the sky with all the colours of the rainbow. Night began to draw its curtains over the scene. A few lights appeared in windows and doorways. There was no street lighting. Nifty finished his wine and got up, apparently to go. Instead, he took a pace back into deeper shade, staring at a figure moving in the purple shadows on the far side of the street.

Ginger, following his eyes, recognized Cornelli. He carried a guitar slung from his shoulder.

‘That’s your friend, isn’t it?’ queried Biggles.

‘Yeah. The blame fool. He’s asking for trouble, he is. He wants his ‘ead looking at.’

‘Why?’

‘I know what he’s up to. Fancy fooling abart with another feller’s gal in a place like this. Ritzy told ‘im to lay off it. We don’t want no trouble o’ that sort. If there’s a row it could mean trouble with the police, and according to Ritzy when that starts in Mexico there ain’t no tellin’ where it’ll end. Now I see he’s still at it.’

‘Who’s the other man?’

‘Feller named José Fonderi. Real *caballero*.¹ *Hidalgo*,² as they say. Got a *hacienda*³ up the river. Tons o’ money, I’m told. Pretty wild, too, from all accounts. Carries a gun. The girl’s old man ain’t got much time for Corny. José’s as good as engaged to the gal. The old man is a real toff. Not much dough but real blue-blood Spanish. José would be a good match for Margarita.’

‘What’s the old man doing here?’

‘He’s a professor of something or other. They say he’s writing a book on the flowers of the desert. I’d better let Ritzy know abart this. He’s scared stiff Corny’ll start something.’

‘Is José the man I saw in town this morning? Good-looking chap. Carries a

red *sarape*.'

'That's 'im. Corny saw him, too. He said so, and told Ritzy he'd keep out of the way. Now look at 'im! Crazy! I'll be getting back. So long.' Nifty strode away in the direction of his home.

Biggles looked at Ginger. 'I fancy Nifty is nearly ready to squeal,' he said, pensively. 'He was afraid of saying too much at one go. He was feeling his way. Given time he'll say more. He's so sick of this place, which is utterly foreign to him, that unless that Cadillac they're waiting for soon comes, or Ritzy gives him his share of the loot, he's liable to do something desperate. He hasn't got his fare home. What with that, and Corny playing fast and loose with a girl against Ritzy's orders, the atmosphere at their villa must be getting a bit strained.'

'The girl must be the Margarita we heard Pepe talking about.'

'I imagine so.'

After a little while Biggles suggested they might take a stroll in the cool of the evening before turning in.

Ginger agreed, so they got up and walked slowly down the dusty road towards the hill that led to the desert. All was quiet. The air was sultry, but refreshing after the burning heat of the day.

Presently to their ears came the soft strumming of a guitar and the voice of a man singing. These romantic sounds, they discovered, came from an orange grove in which was set a detached two-story villa, its white walls shining in the clear moonlight. A short drive led to the door. They paused in passing but could see no one. There was a light in one of the upstairs windows. The window was open.

'Someone serenading his girl friend,' commented Biggles, as they strolled on.

'Corny perhaps.'

'Could be. He was carrying a guitar, and being a South American would speak Spanish like a native.'

They went on past the last houses and up the hill beyond. There, finding a seat on an outcropping tongue of rock, they sat down to rest a little while before returning to the hotel. Biggles lit a cigarette. Ginger gazed moodily across the great loneliness. All was silent, but once, from a long way off came the thin quavering howl of a coyote.

Seeing nothing he gave himself up to the wonder of the sky, now ablaze with a million stars. Twice the size of those dimmed by city lights and dust they looked like lamps suspended from the deep blue dome of heaven, so close that a high-flying aircraft might collide with one of them. The moon, clear shining silver, now high above the distant mountains, drenched the scene with an eerie light. The gigantic *saguaro*s sprawled fantastic shadows on the sand.

Suddenly, in the near distance, a shadow moved. Staring, Ginger made it out to be a horseman, riding towards the village from the desert. He touched

Biggles on the arm and pointed, to call attention to the rider, picking his way at walking pace through the *chaparral*. Actually, the man was as much a part of the scene as his surroundings, but, for no reason which Ginger could have named, there seemed to be something sinister about this silent advance of a solitary figure from the wilderness. The rider went past, joining the track a little farther on. He didn't see them, for he was never nearer than fifty yards and they were half in the shadow of a saguaro.

'I believe that was José,' said Ginger, after the man had disappeared in the direction of the village. 'I recognized that enormous sombrero.'

'You're right,' confirmed Biggles. 'If he's going in to see his girl and finds Corny there doing his lullaby stuff there's likely to be a row. We don't want to be mixed up in it so we'll sit here for a bit.'

A few minutes passed. Then, suddenly, the silence was shattered by a gunshot. A woman's scream pierced the night.

Biggles sprang to his feet. 'That's it,' he ejaculated.

'You mean — one of them has shot the other?'

'What else could it be? Sit still. It's nothing to do with us.'

Then, as they waited, motionless, came the thud of galloping hooves. A few seconds later the rider went past them in a cloud of dust. Being on the track he couldn't fail to see them. Indeed, Ginger saw his face, white in the moonlight, turned towards them. He also saw his hand flash to his hip; but apparently the movement was instinctive, or he thought better of what he must have contemplated, for he went on soon to disappear in the great desolation.

'So it *was* José,' muttered Ginger.

'It was.'

'He saw us.'

'Couldn't help but see us.'

'If he's shot Corny he must know we know who did it.'

'Yes. A pity. We don't want to be involved, so we'd better keep our mouths shut. As I said before, this has nothing to do with us.'

'The locals will know who did the shooting. They knew what was going on. It seemed to be the main topic of conversation.'

'As far as we're concerned we may find we have one crook fewer to deal with. Come on. Let's get back to the tavern. Remember, we've seen nothing.'

They set off down the hill.

Biggles' hopes of reaching the hotel without being observed were not fulfilled. Outside the house where they had heard the guitar three men were standing by a body that lay sprawled face down in the dust. One of them was Juan, the policeman. The others Ginger did not know, but one, an old man with a fine aristocratic face, he thought might be the girl's father. Seeing them the policeman called them over, and as they drew near Ginger saw that the man on the ground was in fact Cornelli.

'Who did this?' demanded Juan, bluntly.

'How should I know?' returned Biggles. 'What has happened?'

‘Can’t you see? A man has been shot.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘Yes, he is dead. Where have you come from?’

‘From the hill.’

‘What were you doing there?’

‘We took a walk before going to bed. We were sitting on a rock. I was smoking a cigarette before returning. We heard a shot. We are now on our way home. Don’t you know who did the shooting?’

‘No.’

This denial surprised Ginger, for from what they had heard in the short time they had been in the village most people would draw their own conclusions.

‘How long ago did you pass this house on the way to the hill?’

‘About half an hour.’

‘Did you see anyone here?’

‘No,’ answered Biggles, truthfully. ‘We heard a man playing a guitar, and singing, but we didn’t see him. While we were at the *posada*, before we started, we saw *Señor* Cornelli go past with a guitar. Here is a man who will confirm that. He was with us at the time.’

Biggles indicated Nifty, who had arrived on the scene, with Ritzy, in their car.

Juan turned to him. ‘Were you at the *posada* tonight talking to these two gentlemen when Senor Cornelli went past.’

‘No,’ lied Nifty fluently.

Ginger stared, astonished, not to say shocked, by such a downright lie. Then, in a flash of inspiration, he understood. Nifty didn’t want Ritzy to know he had been talking to them.

‘Who’s telling lies?’ demanded Juan

‘No one,’ replied Nifty. ‘These gentlemen are making a mistake. It’s true they saw me, and I saw them on the *patio*. I was on my way to get some cigarettes.’

So that was what Nifty had told Ritzy to account for his absence, thought Ginger.

Ritzy was looking hard at Nifty but he said nothing.

‘I will return to my daughter; she is very distressed,’ said the old man, thereby confirming what Ginger had supposed. He turned and walked away in the direction of the house.

‘We’ll go home, too,’ said Biggles. ‘If you want to ask us any more questions you’ll find us at the *posada*.’

Juan made no protest so they walked on.

‘I suppose there’s no doubt that José did the shooting?’ said Ginger.

‘None whatever, as far as I can see. But in the absence of a witness that might be hard to prove.’

‘Then why did Juan say so definitely that he didn’t know who had done the

shooting?’

‘I imagine he had his reasons. He knows the behaviour of people here better than we do. He may have an idea that the old man shot Cornelli.’

‘Surely not.’

‘Nifty told us he didn’t approve of Corny making up to his daughter. In Spain family honour is a very serious thing. Once a marriage has been arranged for a girl it’s absolutely forbidden for her to have anything to do with another man. She mayn’t dance with one even if her mother is with her. But I think we’re in the clear so what does it matter who did the shooting? Corny may have been the man who shot the caretaker, in London, at the time of the diamond robbery. He carried a gun. If that’s so he’s got what was coming to him.’ Biggles smiled. ‘Maybe José was a bit snappier on the draw.’

‘You noticed Nifty didn’t want Ritzy to know he’d been talking to us?’

‘Yes. I noticed that all right. Judging from the way Ritzy looked at him I’m not sure that he believed him.’

Proof of this was soon to come. As they were turning into the hotel a car pulled up beside them and Ritzy jumped out. Walking quickly up to Biggles he said: ‘Was my friend Brimshawe here with you tonight?’

‘I might have got a bit mixed up about that,’ returned Biggles, evenly. ‘We were just talking about it. It could be that I was thinking of earlier in the day, when he was here with you.’ Biggles said this loudly enough for Nifty to hear.

‘Thanks,’ replied Ritzy. ‘That’s all I wanted to know. Just curiosity, that’s all.’ He got back in the car and drove on.

‘That was sailing a bit near the wind, but I don’t want to fall out with Nifty — yet,’ Biggles told Ginger as they went into the hotel. ‘Had I said definitely that Nifty was here with us he wouldn’t have dared to speak to us again. We should have put him in wrong with Ritzy and he wouldn’t have forgiven us.’

1 Gentleman (literally, ‘knight’).

2 *Hidalgo* (Spanish nobility) is a traditional title of persons of the Spanish nobility or gentry. The word is a contraction of the phrases ‘hijo de algo’, literally “a son of something.”

3 Estate.

CHAPTER 8

THE BLUE CADILLAC

THE following day dawned with the promise of being another scorcher.

‘Our first job must be to see about the car, or some other form of transport,’ said Biggles, as they dressed. ‘We can’t just sit here doing nothing about it or Ritzzy, not being a fool, will wonder why. We must at least make a pretence of being anxious to get away. This is no health resort where one might feel inclined to linger for a few days. The breakdown suits our purpose, of course, but it’s a bit disconcerting to know we couldn’t get away if we wanted to. As soon as we’ve had our coffee we’ll get cracking on finding out what transport is available in an emergency.’

They went down to the *patio* and there Pepe brought them their breakfast. He could talk of nothing but the shooting of Cornelli and made no secret that he knew who had fired the shot. They had some difficulty in getting rid of him.

As they were finishing their *frijoles* Juan the policeman appeared. He joined them and accepted a cup of coffee. He, too, and quite naturally, was full of the shooting, and assured them that he knew the man responsible. He said this with a wink. It was clear that as far as he was concerned his inquiries were a foregone conclusion. José always had been a wild one, too handy with his gun, he confided.

‘You’re sure he did it?’ questioned Biggles.

Juan looked astonished by the question. ‘Of course he did it,’ he declared. ‘It was his girl Cornelli was after, wasn’t it?’

This apparently was sufficient motive for the murder.

‘Have you arrested José?’ asked Biggles, curiously.

‘Not yet.’

‘Are you going to?’

Juan, looking worried, considered the question. ‘I shall send for him,’ he decided.

‘Why haven’t you been to question him?’ asked Biggles.

Juan’s eyebrows went up. ‘In this heat? His *hacienda* is seven miles away. Besides,’ he added significantly, ‘he carries a gun.’

Biggles smiled at this naive admission of cowardice.

Juan dropped a small object on the table. ‘There is the bullet that killed Senor Cornelli,’ he declared dramatically. ‘The doctor took it out of his brain.’

‘Why are you carrying it about with you?’ asked Biggles. ‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘I shall keep it for a souvenir,’ replied Juan, casually. ‘I have several bullets in my collection. I could tell you the name of the man each one killed.’

Ginger frowned at this gruesome claim. It was already clear to him that Juan had no intention of pushing his inquiries any further, either because he was afraid of the gunman or possibly because murder was not an uncommon event in this part of Mexico.

Juan put the bullet back in his pocket and got up. 'Women,' he sighed. 'They're the cause of all the trouble in this world, *señores*.' And with that piece of primitive philosophy he walked away.

Biggles watched him go with an expression of disapproval tinged with amusement. Then he turned to Ginger. 'So José did not kill Cornelli after all,' he remarked.

Ginger raised his eyebrows. 'How do you know?'

'I wouldn't say I know anything for certain, but I've seen a few bullets in my time and know something about them. When we saw Jose and stopped to ask him the way to the *posada* the weapon in his holster was an old-fashioned, pearl-handled Colt forty-five. You may have noticed it.'

'I did.'

'It would, like all revolvers of that period, fire a soft lead bullet. Surely if Jose intended to shoot someone that's the gun he'd use. The bullet Juan just showed us was a hard-nosed thirty-eight, the sort that's fired by a modern automatic pistol. Of course, for all we know José might possess such a weapon, but it strikes me as being highly improbable.'

'But if José didn't shoot Cornelli, who did?' questioned Ginger. 'We know he was there at the time, or thereabouts. We also know what most people seem to think was a justifiable motive.'

'Because the motive was so obvious everyone has jumped to the same conclusion. Juan is so sure that José killed Cornelli that he hasn't even troubled to think about it. He'd decided that last night. Those questions he asked were simply a matter of form. I don't know who shot Cornelli but I'd wager it wasn't José, no matter how black the evidence against him. Who else had a motive? The girl's father? We know he disapproved of Cornelli courting his daughter, and if you say that was not a sufficient motive for shooting remember where you are. This is Mexico, not England.'

'He didn't look the sort of man to commit murder,' said Ginger dubiously.

'He may not have intended to kill Cornelli. He may have fired a shot to put a stop to the serenade as one would throw something at a cat caterwauling in the garden, and by mere chance hit the amorous gent with the guitar. The old man couldn't have been far away at the time.'

Ginger shook his head. 'When we saw José riding away he was going flat out like a guilty man.'

'Maybe he thought he'd been shot at.'

'He wouldn't have run away from Cornelli,' argued Ginger.

'He might have thought the girl's father had fired the shot. In that case he wouldn't return the fire for fear of hurting his prospective father-in-law. Only one shot was fired, remember. But why—'

Biggles broke off, staring up the street. 'Holy smoke!' he breathed. 'Look who's coming.'

Ginger looked. It was José himself. He stopped outside the *posada*, threw his reins over the hitching rail and walked straight up to them. 'Good morning, gentlemen,' he said, in English, speaking with his slight American accent. 'May I ask you a few questions?'

'We will do our best to answer them,' replied Biggles, courteously. 'Won't you sit down? May I offer you such hospitality as we have here?'

'No thank you. Last night you were sitting on the hill outside the town.' This was a statement rather than a question.

'That is correct,' agreed Biggles.

'You saw me.'

'Yes.'

'You have told people that you saw me?'

'No.'

José looked surprised. 'Why not?'

'Because I have learned to mind my own business.'

'You know that last night a man was shot?'

'Of course.'

'You know that everyone is saying I killed this man — Cornelli.'

'Yes.'

'You believe that?'

'Before I answer that question, *señor*, let me ask you one. Do you carry any other gun except the one I see in your holster?'

'No. I have no other gun. This one is enough. Why would I need another?'

'In that case I do not believe you shot Cornelli.'

'You must be the only man in the town who believes that,' said José, bitterly. 'Have a you reason?'

'Yes. Juan was here this morning and he showed me the bullet that killed Cornelli. It could not have been fired from the gun you are carrying.'

'Did you point that out to Juan?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I have already said, *señor*, that I do not talk about what is not my business. Certainly it is not for me to teach the police.'

'In Mexico that is wise, *señor*. But do not misunderstand me. It was my intention to shoot this *gringo* Cornelli. I had a reason. That was why I came to the village last night. But the work was done for me. Foolishly, acting without thinking, I rode away. Had I been given the pleasure of shooting Cornelli I would have stayed. It would have been nothing to be ashamed of. As it is, I object to being blamed for a shooting done by another man. People will think I am a coward because I ran away. At least, they think I ran away.'

'But you did run away.'

'Not for the reason you think.'

‘You must have been near Cornelli at the time he was shot. Did you see the man who shot him?’

‘Yes, quite plainly, in the moonlight. After firing the shot he vanished.

‘Into the house?’

Jose frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

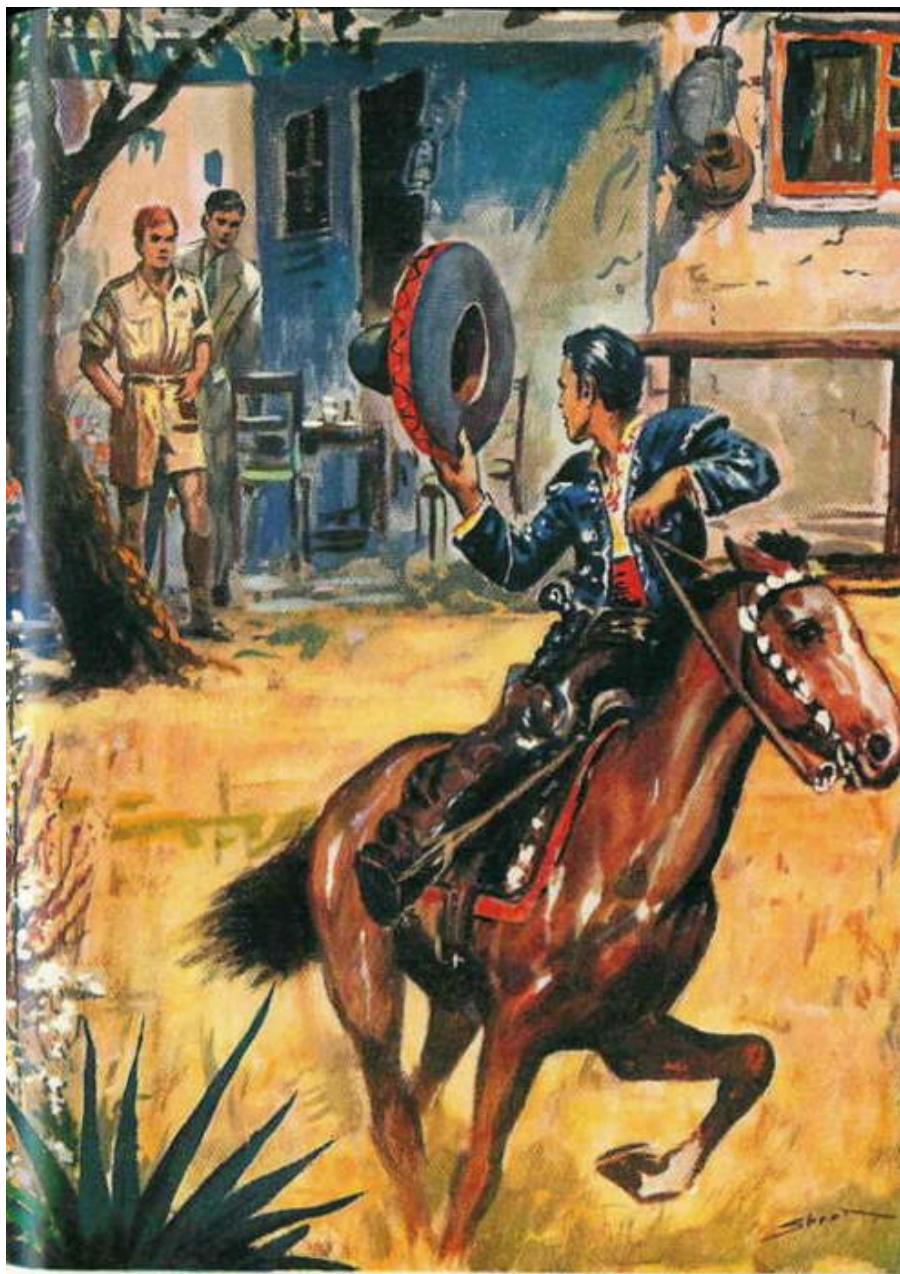
‘I thought it might have been the father of *Señorita* Margarita.’

‘No, *señor*. He hated Cornelli but he would not have shot him. He will not even kill a rattlesnake. For what reason Cornelli and his friends came here I do not know, but they have stayed too long.’

‘Do you know of any reason why anyone else should want to shoot Cornelli?’ asked Biggles.

‘No, *señor*. I do not know. But I must go to see Juan. I came to see you first to find out how much you knew of the affair. *Adiós, señores*, and a thousand thanks. If I can be of assistance to you at any time you have only to let me know. I am often in the village.’

With a sweep of his sombrero José returned to his horse, swung a leg over the saddle and rode away.



José swung a leg over the saddle and rode away (page 88)

‘He knows who shot Cornelli,’ said Biggles, as he watched him go.

‘Do you think he’s going to tell Juan?’

‘I don’t know. If we hadn’t seen him last night there would be no evidence that he was in the village. People would have taken it for granted that he had

shot Cornelli but there would have been no proof. That's why he came to see us. What he really wanted to know was, had we told Juan we saw him.'

'You believe his story?'

'Every word of it. He's a gentleman, as proud as they come, and in a Spaniard that means something. Notice the way he admitted he was prepared to shoot Cornelli; but he's not going to be saddled with something he didn't do. That's different. I'd say he's gone to see Juan. But let's take a stroll and make inquiries about local transport, if there is any.'

They proceeded with their quest, and in less than an hour had learned that, as Biggles had suspected, there was no regular transport. A bus came about once a month from Hermosillo, bringing stores and returning with produce. There were two privately owned cars, both very old, and a creak that had once been a jeep. There were a few horses, mules and donkeys, but they were not even considered. Somewhat depressed they returned to the inn and resumed their chairs on the *patio*.

They had been there about twenty minutes when the sound of an approaching car turned their eyes in its direction. It was a Cadillac, and its colour was blue.

'Looks as if Schultz has got here at last,' murmured Biggles. 'I was hoping it wouldn't arrive just yet. It means we shall have to get busy. If Schultz once gets those diamonds in his car, stuck here as we are without a conveyance of any sort we can say good-bye to them. Negotiations with Ritzy might only take a few minutes, or at most a few hours. It's going to be galling to see that car start back for the States with no way of following it.'

The car pulled up outside the inn. There were three men in it. One of them lowered the window and shouted: 'Is this the hotel?'

'What passes for one here,' answered Biggles.

The three men got out, one carrying a fat portfolio, and walked up to the *patio*, the man who had spoken leading the way. He was a big man wearing thick-lensed glasses. He walked with a limp. In every respect he answered to the description of Schultz given to Biggles by von Stalhein. The other two men, glancing about them, kept close to him.

'Escort,' breathed Biggles. 'Schultz has arrived, and it looks as if he's brought the cash.'

Schultz shouted loudly for the proprietor. He glanced at Biggles. 'I suppose we can get a drink here?' He spoke in English with a pronounced foreign accent.

'Orange juice is the only safe bet,' answered Biggles.

Pepe appeared, bowing and washing his hands in invisible water.

Schultz ordered the drinks with plenty of water. He looked hot and tired. He looked again at Biggles. Indicating the retiring Pepe he said: 'Does this fellow speak any language except Mexican Spanish?'

'No,' Biggles told him. 'Can I help? What do you want?'

'I want three bedrooms for at least one night. I'm not going to cross that

desert twice in one day.'

'You're out of luck,' said Biggles. 'There are only three rooms here and we're in one of them. One of the other two rooms is a double, though.'

Schultz subjected him to a penetrating stare. 'Are you staying long?'

'I don't know. My car's broken down.'

Schultz, rudely, turned his back.

Pepe appeared with the drinks. From the way they were consumed the travellers were obviously thirsty, which Ginger could well understand. All three of them then followed Pepe inside, presumably to look at the accommodation.

Biggles looked at Ginger with a whimsical smile. 'We're getting quite a party.'

'You're sure it's Schultz?'

'Unless a miracle has happened in the way of coincidence it couldn't be anyone else.'

'What are we going to do?'

'Frankly, I don't know. We knew Schultz was likely to arrive but I wasn't reckoning on three of them. However, if they're staying the night we have a few hours to think about it. We'll watch them. What Schultz does should tell us if he has the diamonds.'

The three newcomers were still inside — they could be heard washing — when down the street, walking fast and sometimes breaking into a run, came Nifty.

'News travels fast,' said Ginger. 'Fancy running in this heat.'

'I have a notion something's happened,' muttered Biggles. 'If Ritzy knew the Cadillac had arrived why didn't he come himself? And why not use the car?'

Nifty came up. His face was pale and his manner agitated. 'How long's that been 'ere,' he panted, pointing at the blue car.

'It arrived a few minutes ago,' Biggles told him.

Nifty's face screwed into a mirthless smile. It *would* come today,' he groaned, slumping into a chair.

'Why, what's wrong?' inquired Biggles. 'It's the car you were expecting, isn't it?'

'Yeah. But—'

'But what?'

'It's come too late.'

'What do you mean?' asked Biggles, trying not to show too much interest.

'Haven't you heard?'

'We've heard nothing. What's happened? Pull yourself together, man.'

Whatever answer Biggles might have expected it was not the one he received. That was made abundantly clear from the expression that came over his face when Nifty blurted: 'It's Ritzy.'

'What about him?'

‘He’s been arrested.’

‘*Arrested!*’ exclaimed Biggles. ‘For what?’

‘Murder.’

For a second Biggles could only stare. ‘Who is he supposed to have murdered?’

‘Cornelli.’

Understanding dawned in Biggles’ eyes. ‘What gave the police that idea?’

‘José. He saw him do it.’

‘Ah!’ breathed Biggles. ‘Where’s Ritzzy now?’

‘They’ve taken him to the police-station.’

Nifty mopped his sweating face helplessly.

‘Get a grip on yourself and tell us what happened,’ requested Biggles.

¹ Foreigner.

CHAPTER 9

BIGGLES MAKES A DEAL

WHILE Nifty was making an effort to recover his composure Biggles turned to Ginger a face from which incredulity had not entirely faded.

‘So it was Ritzy, of all people,’ he breathed, in an undertone. ‘The possibility never entered my head.’

‘We were looking for someone with a motive,’ Ginger pointed out.

‘Ritzy had two reasons, although one could hardly call them sufficient motives for murder. Corny was playing a game that might have got them all into trouble, which was a chance they couldn’t afford to take in a place like this. Again, with Corny out of the way there would be one less to share the — er — money. No doubt Ritzy thought it was a safe bet. He must have heard the local gossip and gambled that José would be blamed for the shooting.’

Biggles turned back to Nifty. ‘Do you believe Ritzy shot Cornelli?’

There ain’t much doubt about that,’ answered Nifty, grimly. ‘I told you Jose saw him do it and they’ll take his word before Ritzy’s. Besides, that ain’t the only evidence. As far as I can make it out what happened this morning was this. The police chief from Hermosillo rolled up here on his monthly round. He had two men with him. They called to see Juan. He was telling them about the murder when José walked in and spilt the beans properly. The first we knew about this was when the chief, Juan, and the two other cops, walked into the villa all nice and matey like. The chief asks to see Ritzy’s gun. Said he was checking up on the number for the licence. Ritzy, suspecting nothing, ‘ands it over like a lamb. The next thing he knew the bracelets was on his wrists. Blimey! You ought to have seen his face.’

‘What make was his gun?’

‘I dunno the make but it was a thirty-eight automatic. One bullet had been fired. Juan had a thirty-eight bullet. Said it was the one that killed Corny. Same sort as was in Ritzy’s gun.’

‘That doesn’t look too good for Ritzy.’

‘If you arst me I’d say ‘e ‘asn’t a ‘ope. I’m in a nice mess now, I am.’

‘Why should you be worried?’

‘Why? What am I going to do? I’ve no money. Not a cent. I can’t get ‘ome and I can’t live on air.’

‘What about the car Ritzy’s been using? Who does that belong to?’

‘Belongs to all of us, I reckon. It was bought out of mutual funds.’

‘That should get you to the nearest British consulate — unless you’ve some reason for wishing to stay here.’

Nifty thought for a moment. ‘I should still need money for petrol and oil, and grub while I was on the road.’

‘Couldn’t Ritzy help you?’

'I dunno. Maybe he's gone already.'

'Gone where?'

'They say he'll have to go to Hermosillo for trial. There's no court here. Stewth! What 'ave I let myself in for?'

'What about your friends who have just arrived in this car? Won't they help you?'

'I shouldn't think so. Not when I tell 'em the truth.'

'What truth do you mean?'

'They've come all the way from San Francisco to collect something and I don't know where it is. Only Ritzy knows. Now I shall be lucky if I ever know. Even if they don't 'ang Ritzy he's likely to be in the pen for years. I've told him a dozen times to get rid o' that gun. What a mess he's made o' things — and he reckoned he was so smart.'

'What are you going to tell your friends here? They'll be down any minute now.'

'I shall 'ave to tell 'em what's happened. Can't do nothing else.'

'They'll be annoyed.'

'Mad, I reckon. It was all my fault, too.'

'How was that?'

'You remember last night we saw Corny go past with his guitar?'

'Of course.'

'I went 'ome and told Ritzy. I should have kept my trap shut.'

'It made him angry,' prompted Biggles.

'He flew in a temper. Said he'd had enough of Corny chucking 'is weight about and off he went.'

'Maybe he had another reason for knocking off Corny,' suggested Biggles, evenly.

Nifty looked startled. 'What do you mean?'

'With only two of you to share it your money would have split two ways instead of three.'

'What money?' inquired Nifty, shrewdly, his eyes on Biggles' face.

Biggles shrugged. 'Well, you told me yourself Ritzy kept the pay-roll.'

'That's right. So I did,' admitted Nifty.

Further conversation on these lines was prevented by the arrival on the scene of Schultz and his companions.

'Can any of you gentlemen direct me to a villa of the name Los Palmeras?' he asked.

Nifty threw Biggles a glance of resignation. 'I can show you the way,' he told Schultz in a melancholy voice. 'But if it's Brabinsky you're looking for it ain't no use you going there,' he added.

'Why not?' asked Schultz, sharply.

'He ain't there.'

'Do you know where I could find him?'

'I know where he is but I doubt they'll let you see him.'

‘Where is he?’

‘In gaol.’

‘In prison! For what?’ Schultz looked alarmed.

‘Murder.’

‘*Murder!*’

‘He shot a man last night.’

Schultz looked taken aback — not without reason, thought Ginger.

‘Has he gone out of his mind?’

‘He’s likely to now, if he ain’t already.’

Schultz’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you one of his friends?’

‘You can call it that if you like.’

‘There’s another. Where is he?’

‘He’s the man Brabinsky shot.’

‘Let us go to the house and you can tell us exactly what has happened,’ said Schultz, stiffly. ‘We’ll go in my car.’

Nifty rose wearily to his feet. ‘Just as you like.’

All four men went off in the car. Ginger noticed that one of the escort was still carrying the portfolio.

‘This *has* dropped the wrench in the gears, good and proper,’ muttered Biggles. ‘The question is now, what will Schultz do when Nifty tells him Ritzy hid the stones and he doesn’t know where they are? He’ll have to tell him. It looks as if Schultz is likely to stay here longer than he expected. At least, I imagine he won’t merely turn round and go back to the States without the things he came for. If it comes to that we might as well go home ourselves.’

Ginger looked surprised. ‘Go home?’

‘It’s hard to see what we can do here so there’s really no point in staying. Ritzy, the only man who knows where the diamonds are, is in prison, and whether he’s found guilty or not he’s likely to be there for some time. Corny’s dead. Nifty has no money. What else can he do but try to work his way home? For once the problem seems to have sorted itself out for us. The important thing is, Schultz won’t get the stones. They may stay for years where Ritzy hid them. If they hang him they’ll never be found. If he does a stretch in prison they’ll deport him when he’s released.’

‘If Schultz gets to see Ritzy he may learn where the stones are hidden.’

‘Why should Ritzy tell him? He can’t receive money while he’s in gaol.’

‘Ritzy might tell Nifty.’

‘Knowing that Nifty would push off with the stones, or sell them to Schultz and keep the money? Not on your life. There’s no honour among thieves. They don’t trust each other a yard.’

‘All right. Now tell me this. How are we going to get back to the States?’

Biggles was thinking. ‘Nifty needs money badly—’ he began.

‘Schultz may give him some,’ cut in Ginger.

‘Not a hope. Why should he give him money? I’ve an idea. If I can get

Nifty alone I'll suggest we buy Ritzy's car off him for ready cash. That would answer our transport problem.'

'He'll probably say he wants the car himself, to get away.'

'He has no money for petrol. He said so. The car's no use to him. If he should raise that argument we could offer to take him along with us when we leave here for good. Whether he stays with us or leaves us he'll be arrested if ever he lands in England. Let's walk along to the villa and see what's happening there, anyway.'

They had no difficulty in finding Los Palmeras, for it was only about a quarter of a mile and, as they had been told, the name was on one of the two white gateposts. The gate itself, of rusty iron, had broken from its support and had been dragged carelessly on what may once have been a garden but was now an overgrown tangle of flowers and shrubs run wild. As they walked up the short drive, which had been kept reasonably clear by the car, they could hear voices raised in argument.

The villa itself was of the usual whitewashed adobe construction and stood no more than twenty yards from the road. The door was open, also the windows, presumably to catch what little air there was moving. The Cadillac had drawn up on the road. Ritzy's Overland stood on the drive close to the front door.

Biggles walked on slowly, looking about him like a man who is on strange ground, as indeed he was; but as soon as he was close enough to hear what was being said inside the house he stopped.

'It's no use blaming me,' Nifty was protesting sullenly. 'I tell you I don't know where he's put the stuff. You ought to 'ave got 'ere sooner. Watcher been doin' all this time?'

'I have told you the trouble we have had. What made you choose a place like this?' growled Schultz. 'We have been all over Mexico looking for it.'

'Ritzy was only trying to keep 'andy.'

'You understand we have had all this trouble for nothing?'

'You've had trouble! What about me?' complained Nifty, bitterly. 'You're all right. You can go back to the States. But what am I going to do?'

'What you do is of no importance to me,' stated Schultz, bluntly. 'See Brabinsky and get him to tell you what we all want to know.'

'He won't tell me nothin'. Why don't you see 'im yerself? Maybe he'll tell you.'

'I shall see what can be done,' said Schultz, in his thick guttural voice.

Ginger's eyes caught a movement on his right. Standing behind a bush, watching them, not ten yards away, was one of Schultz's guards. Seeing that he was observed the man walked slowly forward, a hand in a side pocket. His face was expressionless but his eyes were dark with suspicion.

'What do you here?' he asked, speaking in English.

'We've come to see Mr Brimshawe,' answered Biggles, casually. 'Hearing that he was engaged we were waiting for his visitor to go.'

‘About what do you wish to see him?’

‘It occurred to us that he might be willing to sell his car, or lend it to us. We’re stuck here with a serious breakdown, you know.’

After a short pause the man said, ‘It is no use waiting. He will be some time.’

‘In that case would you be so good as to give him a message?’

‘What is it?’

‘Tell him that when he has a free moment I’d like to see him. He’ll find me at the hotel.’

‘I will tell him,’ replied the man, unsmilingly.

‘Thank you.’ Biggles turned and walked back down the drive to the road, and then on towards the inn.

‘He was suspicious,’ said Ginger.

‘Of course he was. He’s never anything but suspicious. That obviously is part of his job. But the reason I gave for being there was a perfectly natural one. As I expected they’re talking the matter over, each blaming the other for what has happened. Schultz hasn’t made up his mind what to do about it.’

‘I don’t see there’s much he can do.’

‘With his sort you can never tell. He won’t give up easily. And remember, he has a lot of money on him, or so I suppose, and with money you can do a lot.’

They reached the hotel and sank into their usual chairs on the *patio*.

The day wore on. Evening came. There was no sign of Nifty.

‘They won’t want him to talk to anyone,’ said Biggles. ‘In his present mood he might say too much.’

‘This is a bit of a bind,’ grumbled Ginger. ‘Just sitting here doing nothing.’

‘Tell me what else we can do,’ returned Biggles. ‘All we can do is rest on our oars and leave it to Schultz to make the next move. It’s no use trying to guess what that will be. He’s up to something or he’d be back here by now. He can’t be nattering with Nifty all this time.’

Night had closed in, and they were again on the *patio* after their evening meal when Nifty, moving with the stealth of a burglar, appeared.

‘Is it all right to talk?’ he whispered.

‘There’s no one here, if that’s what you mean,’ Biggles assured him.

‘Were you looking for me?’

‘Yes. Did you get my message?’

‘No. I didn’t get no message but I saw you in the garden, through the window, and thought maybe you’d got something you wanted to tell me.’

‘Where are your friends? Or are they friends? You seem to be scared of them.’

‘You’d be scared if you knew as much about ‘em as I know,’ said Nifty, with surprising frankness. ‘You be careful what you’re up to. They’re as healthy to have around as a bunch o’ rattlesnakes.’

‘Where are they?’

‘Gone to Hermosillo to try to get in touch with Ritzy.’

‘With what object?’

‘I dunno. What did you want to see me about?’

‘You’ve got a car. Who does it actually belong to?’

‘I told you. To all of us, I reckon, till Corny got his chips. We all put money towards it. Why?’

‘Would you care to sell it to us? You know how we’re fixed.’

‘I may want it myself. How am I going to get away from this stinking ‘ole without a car?’

‘We could give you a lift. We have at least got plenty of money for petrol and oil. It’s not much use to you, fixed as you are.’

Nifty considered the proposition. ‘There might be something in that,’ he conceded. ‘By the way, I’d better tell you before I forget. That cove who spotted you in the garden came in after you’d gone and told Schultz —’

‘Who’s Schultz?’ inquired Biggles, feigning ignorance.

‘He’s the boss of this gang what’s just rolled up. He asked me if I knew you. I said I’d only met you here. He asked me what your name was. When I said Bigglesworth he went sort o’ stiff and made a face as if he knew something about you.’

‘Maybe, like Ritzy, he’d heard of a Bigglesworth at Scotland Yard,’ suggested Biggles, carelessly.

‘Ah. That could be it.’

‘What about the car?’ prompted Biggles.

‘Well, I couldn’t leave ‘ere just yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘Juan says I’d better stay ‘ere in case I’m wanted as a witness in this business of Ritzy’s. Anyhow, I’d better hang about to see if Schultz can do anything for Ritzy.’

‘What can *he* do?’

‘There was some talk of getting the best lawyer in Mexico to defend him. Schultz has plenty of dough.’

‘Why should he be so anxious to help Ritzy?’

‘Between you and me Ritzy’s got something he wants. But I’d better be gettin’ back to the villa in case —’

‘Just a minute,’ broke in Biggles. ‘You say you’re short of money. Whatever is decided about Ritzy will take time, so it looks as if you’re likely to starve. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. If you don’t feel like selling the car I’ll give you two hundred dollars for the use of it for two or three days. That should see you all right.’

‘What use would that be to you?’

‘My friend here could slip up to Los Angeles and get the spare part we need for our Studebaker. He’d come straight back so your car should be here by the time you’re likely to need it. Ritzy need know nothing about it.’

Nifty was obviously tempted. ‘If ‘e did find out there’d be a row. He

doesn't like anyone using the car except 'imself.'

'If we could get our car going you would still have your car and two hundred dollars in your pocket for expenses,' urged Biggles. 'This is no sort of place to be stuck without money.'

'You're telling me.'

'And remember, you living with Ritzy there's always a chance that the police might rope you in as an accessory in the Cornelli shooting business. If you don't like it here you'll like it less in a Mexican gaol.'

That did it. 'Okay,' decided Nifty. 'When does your friend want to start?'

'The sooner he goes the quicker he'll be back. He could start right away.'

'Will he come and fetch it or shall I bring it 'ere?'

'You go and fetch it. While you're away I'll walk over the road to Lorenzo and make ready to fill up with oil and petrol.'

'What about the two hundred bucks?'

'I'll give it to you when you bring the car. Don't be long.'

'Righto.' Nifty strode away into the darkness.

'I don't like that hint that Schultz may know who you are,' said Ginger, anxiously.

'Never mind about that,' answered Biggles. 'If Schultz gets the information he wants from Ritzy, or gets him out on bail or something of that sort, things will look serious. Once Schultz gets his hands on those stones we shan't see him for dust. He'll make for the States, and our only chance then would be to get there before him. That's why we *must* have a car.'

'What exactly do you want me to do?'

'It's quite straightforward. As soon as you're across the border get to a phone and call Algy at his hotel in San Francisco. Tell him what has happened here and ask him to let the Air Commodore know how things stand. He must be wondering what's happened. Buy a new clutch and bring it back here. You may have to go as far as Los Angeles for one. In that case Algy and Bertie might step on a plane and slip down to see you. But don't hang about too long. Get back here as quickly as you can. Is that all clear?'

'There shouldn't be any difficulty about that,' said Ginger, confidently.

'Here's Nifty with the car,' went on Biggles, as they walked across the road to the petrol store. He waved to Nifty to let him see where they were and the car came to stop outside the house.

In ten minutes, filling the tanks from cans, it was ready for its journey. Ginger got into the driving seat, and with a brief 'Be seeing you,' disappeared up the dusty road into the night.

Biggles counted the promised money into Nifty's hand.

'They're not back yet but I'd better get along in case,' said Nifty. 'Thanks.' Stuffing the notes into his breast pocket he strode away.

A distant flash of lightning turned Biggles' eyes to the sky.

'*Amenaza tormenta*,' muttered Lorenzo, as he collected the empty cans. 'I think the rain comes at last.'

Biggles did not pay much attention. He was too concerned with the way events were shaping. Walking back to the *patio* he dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette.

¹ Threatening storm/storm coming.

CHAPTER 10

BAD LUCK FOR GINGER

GINGER, blissfully unaware of what the fates had in store for him in the immediate future, was in good heart as the borrowed car climbed the hill to the desert route to the border. He had found the inaction irksome and was glad to be doing something useful. He thought the drive, by night instead of through the heat of the day, might even be pleasant. But when he reached the brow and saw lightning flashing all along the horizon he was not so sure about that. Still, he had driven through storms before and did not expect serious difficulty.

It was soon clear from the brilliance of the lightning that the storm was coming his way. The air was humid and oppressive. Black, ominous-looking clouds appeared, racing low across the sky. A few large spots of rain splashed on his windscreen. At all events, he thought cheerfully, if it rained he would not run short of water. But the rain soon stopped. The moon was not yet up, but his headlights showed the rutted track plainly enough. Another cloud dropped a few more drops of rain. This, he told himself, was what the village had been praying for. The water shortage was becoming a problem.

When the car suddenly became unmanageable his first thought was that something had gone wrong with the steering. He stopped and got out to look, to find, to his disgust, that his front offside wheel was flat. A puncture. Had he been in the habit of swearing he could have cursed, cheerfully. This was going to delay him. He had hoped to run out of the storm. This set-back had spoiled his chance. However, there was only one thing to do. He knew he had a spare wheel because he had noticed it.

He snatched an anxious glance at the horizon over which was rising an ugly black curtain. Dust was beginning to swirl. Tumble-weed was bouncing across the track like overgrown hedgehogs. On the wind came the rumble of thunder. The world was in utter darkness except when the lightning lit up the scene.

He went to work in haste. First he looked, or rather, felt, in the pockets of the instrument panel, hoping, and indeed expecting to find a torch. There wasn't one. This was going to make things more difficult, but he was not dismayed.

To change a wheel in the ordinary way, in daylight, is a fairly simple operation, one that Ginger had done several times. Someone to help makes the job even easier. But, as he soon discovered, to do the work alone, on a pitch dark night, with a strange car, was a very different matter. It took him a little while to find the tools, but having done so, taking advantage of every flash of lightning, he went ahead, jacking up the car and going through the usual procedure, taking the utmost care to put everything where he could lay his

hands on it again. This was particularly necessary because he was near the edge of the track, where the sandy ground fell away somewhat into the mesquit.

The change over took him about half an hour. Hot and dishevelled, but glad that the rain had held off until he had finished, he gathered up the tools and packed them back in their locker. After taking a quick look round in the next flash of lightning to make sure he was leaving nothing behind he got back into his seat, slammed the door and resumed his journey.

When a few minutes later a little more rain fell he told himself he had been lucky to get away with dry clothes. This time the rain persisted, making it more difficult to see the track, particularly when dust swirled over it. Taking no chances he drove slowly, more carefully.

Then the storm really arrived. The lightning was blinding. Thunder crashed in a continuous cannonade as if all the artillery in the world was in action. Sometimes it cracked right over his head. The earth seemed to rock under the furious bombardment. Ginger's brain began to rock, too, with the strain of driving in such conditions; but he held grimly on his way, determined at all costs to get through to the frontier.

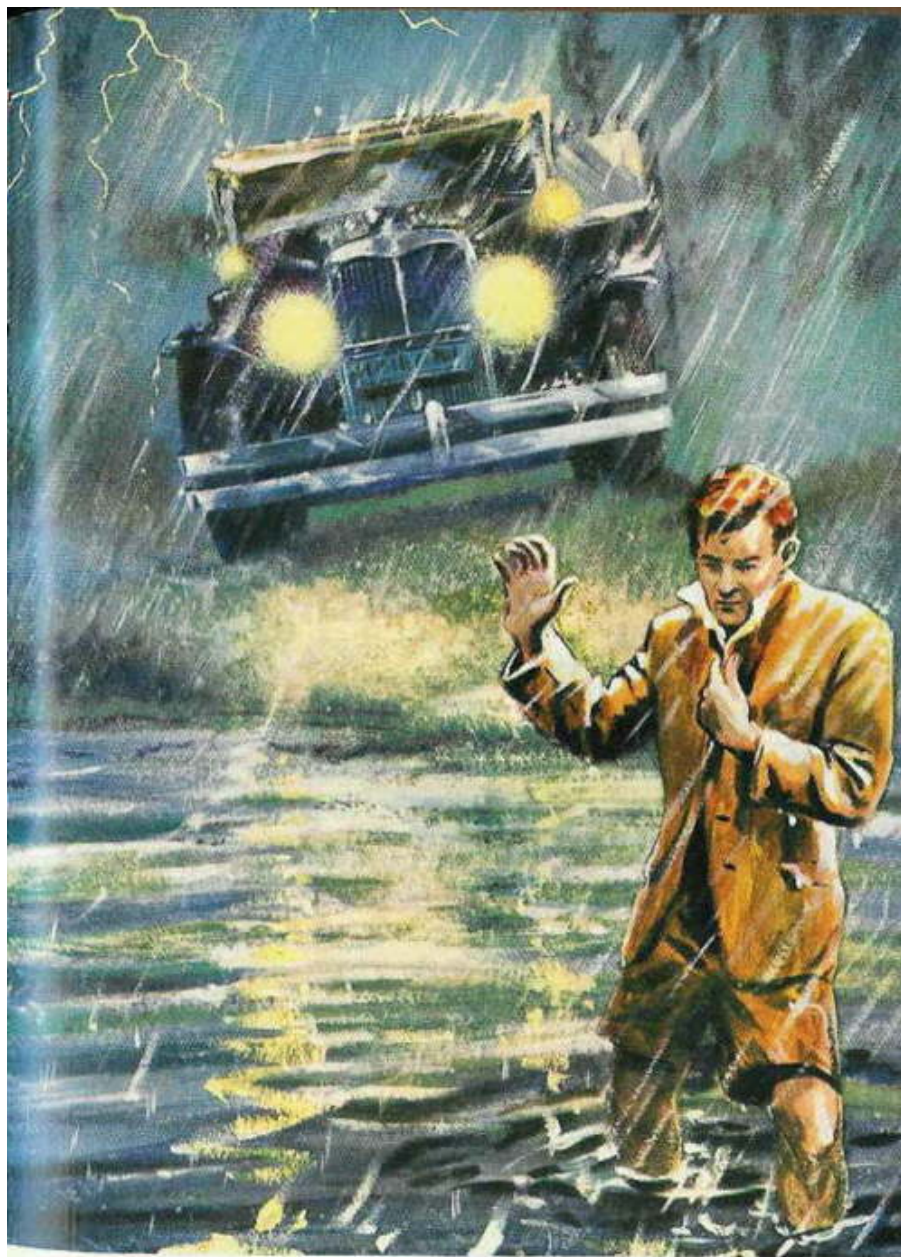
Then suddenly came the deluge. It was as if all the clouds had burst together, discharging their contents on the thirsty land to make up for lost time. The water fell in sheets, blotting out everything from view, and Ginger realized that he had in fact struck a cloud-burst. To continue in such conditions was out of the question. He stopped, and sat huddled in his seat, appalled by the noise, while the storm reached a fantastic crescendo. The world appeared to have turned to water. The driving rain even found its way into the car.

All he could do was sit there, thoroughly miserable, feeling frustrated, angry, impatient to get on. How long the storm lasted he didn't know. It may have been an hour. He didn't check the time. However, eventually the storm passed on, leaving behind it a steady drizzle which made it difficult to see the track. He perceived that it was now not so much a track as a continuous puddle, with sheets of water on both sides of it. Now the rain had come it had fallen faster than the parched earth could drink it.

He decided that it was no use waiting any longer. The present conditions might last for hours. He had wasted enough time already. He started the engine, but when he put in the clutch and started to move the car slid about sickeningly. What had been sand and dry earth was now mud; thick viscous stuff that clung to the wheels and prevented the tyres from getting a grip. However, he was able to make some progress. It was slow work, and it became obvious that he would arrive hours behind schedule. There was nothing he could do about it. It was just bad luck. He comforted himself with the thought that now the storm had passed conditions would improve. They could hardly be worse. The sand would soon absorb the surplus water.

A few minutes later he was looking with dismay at a torrent rushing at

right angles across the track — or what was left of the track. He recognized the spot as the place where, on their outward journey, they had stuck in the loose sand. It had then been a dry river bed. Now it was a stream of unknown depth. It seemed incredible. Not daring to put the car into it without first getting some idea of the depth, leaving his headlights on he got out for a closer investigation.



Ginger waded into the torrent for a closer investigation (page 109)

He discovered, to his great relief, that nowhere did the water come above his knees; but the bottom was soft and sticky. He did not like the feel of it at all, but decided that he might as well try to get through as spend the rest of the night looking at it. The water might be getting deeper, he thought, as it scoured out the bed.

Returning to the car, fearful of sticking in the middle he tried to make the passage at speed. Ploughing into the flood in a cloud of spray at first he made fair progress; but by the time he had reached the middle his wheels were spinning and he thought he had stuck. However, inch by inch, with the car wandering all over the place, he got across. Then, just as he was congratulating himself on the success of the operation the lights went out. Only then did he realize how dark it really was. There was no need to wonder what had happened. The water had reached a weak place in the ignition system and caused a short. There was of course no question of trying to repair the damage.

Disheartened, but refusing to be beaten, he resolved to press on, at all events while this was possible; for thinking back and trying to visualize the place as he had seen it in daylight, to the best of his recollection the road at this point ran dead straight. This may have been the case, but even so, to keep a straight course in such conditions, with the wheels sliding about in mud and the vehicle often out of control, was really beyond all reasonable hope. It did occur to him to wait for the moon; but the sky above was still overcast, and he had of course no idea of how long it would be before the clouds broke. It might be hours. He resolved to press on regardless. Very soon he was to realize that this was an unwise decision.

The first he knew that he was off the track was when he bumped into something solid. This was followed instantly by a crash that really frightened him. For a moment he thought the car had been struck by lightning. When he had recovered from the shock he found he had collided with one of the big *saguaros*. He could see the arms silhouetted against the sky. One of them had been brought down by the collision and had fallen across the roof. He tried to move it, but the needle-like thorns running into his unprotected hands soon put an end to that.

Groping his way about he found he had been lucky in one respect. The *sagurao* stood alone, in a little open space, so that he had enough room to back out of the mess. Getting into the car, in this, with some difficulty, he was successful. With an alarming scraping crunch, as if the body of the car was being torn from the chassis, the arm was dragged off and he was clear. For a minute, sick and exasperated, he sat still, trying to collect himself.

On which side was the road? From what angle had he entered the little open space? He was by no means sure, but he thought he had gone off the track on the left hand side. It should, therefore, be somewhere on his right.

This may have been so, but he did not succeed in finding it.

For some time, savage with mortification, he blundered about, constantly in collision with obstacles of one sort or another. He no longer attempted to deceive himself. He had lost all sense of direction and knew he was relying on luck.

He had just decided that rather than make matters worse the only sane thing to do was to wait for daylight when he felt the car begin to slide. He

applied the brakes until they locked the wheels, but it was no use. The car continued to slide, downhill, gathering speed on a surface that might have been glass. He remembered the several storm-torn gulches and *arroyos* he had noticed on the way to Eltora. That he was sliding into one of them was evident; but all he could do was throw open a door and make ready to jump the moment the car looked like turning over, as he was afraid it would should it strike uneven ground.

Actually, the car reached the bottom of the declivity without falling over, but any satisfaction and relief this may have given him was promptly squashed when water came pouring in through the open door and the floorboards. Yet the car was still moving. For some seconds he couldn't understand what had happened, or what was happening. Then with consternation, he realized that he was afloat. Afloat in a desert. It was so preposterous that had he not been so scared he would have laughed.

There was nothing he could do about it except lift his legs level with the seat to keep them out of the water.

The car did not drift far. He could feel it sinking, and after one or two scrapes and bumps it came to rest, the floorboards awash in the turgid tide of storm water. Then, ironically, the moon appeared in a break in the clouds and he could see where he was. Bitterly he regretted that he had not sat still at the first sign of trouble and waited for this moment; but realizing that regrets would not help him now he settled down prepared to stay where he was until the flood subsided.

Climbing on to the roof of the car it did not take him long to perceive that no matter how long he waited his chances of getting the car going again were remote. It was at the bottom of an *arroyo*, a deep erosion in the face of the desert caused by centuries of storms such as the one he had had the misfortune to encounter. Yet, he saw, his position might easily have been worse, for there were places where the sides of the *arroyo* were sheer, and had he struck such a spot, when the car would have fallen, he could hardly have escaped without serious injury. He might have been trapped in the car and drowned.

That was as much as he could see before the clouds closed up again and black night once more took possession of the scene.

As Ginger sat there, ruminating on the disaster while he waited for the dawn, one thing became plain. He was not likely to reach the border the next day, or any other day, in the car. True, the water was going down. So was the car. He could feel it settling in the sand. To attempt to reach the border on foot, to cross the hideous desert without food or water, would be stark madness. All he could do, he decided, was find the track and walk back to Eltora, a matter, he thought, of between ten and fifteen miles. Biggles would not be pleased at the failure of his mission but he would understand. Neither would Nifty be pleased when he learned that his car had been abandoned in the desert. Not that Ginger was particularly concerned by what Nifty might say.

A cold grey dawn confirmed his fears. Apart from an occasional pool the water had disappeared, leaving the car hopelessly bogged up to the running boards in sand. Debris, mostly dead vegetable matter, that had floated down on the flood, festooned the body from bonnet to boot, giving the vehicle an appearance of having been there for years.

Ginger did make a half-hearted attempt to clear the wheels although he knew from the outset that he was wasting his time. The alkaline sand, when wet, was like pulp, and slid back into the holes he made with his hands as fast as he dragged it out. His feet sank into it to above the ankles, and after squelching about in it for some time, getting well plastered with the stuff, he gave up.

His next move was to climb to the lip of the *arroyo*, no easy task, and look about him, hoping to see a landmark that he was able to recognize. But there was none. On all sides stretched the desert, with the *saguaro*s, their numerous arms upraised, looking even more hopeless than they had been in the blazing sunlight.

He was still there, not daring to move far from the car in case he should fail to find it again, when the mist lifted and the sun appeared, already well on its daily journey across the heavens. It may have been the heat it was hurling down that put a new fear into Ginger's heart. What if he was unable to find the track? It had been by no means clearly defined before the storm. The water might almost have washed it out of existence. However, he told himself, he would have to try and find it. It was no use staying where he was.

Marking a conspicuous *saguaro* to give him his bearings he set off, taking a circular course, the circles widening. It was a haphazard method of searching but he could think of no other; any wheelmarks made by the car after leaving the track had of course been washed out by the tempest. At the start he had been convinced that the track could not be far away, but as time went on and he could see no sign of it he could only conclude that he had travelled farther than he had supposed.

Now thoroughly alarmed he decided to return to the car and start afresh. He could still see his landmark; the giant *saguaro*; or he thought he could. When he reached it he found it was not the one. His had three fingers pointing skyward. The one he had imagined was his had four, although this only became apparent when he was near and could see the gaunt monstrosity silhouetted against the sky.

He was getting thirsty, yet incredible though it seemed there was not a drop of water to be found. The parched earth had swallowed it even more quickly than he had imagined possible. A sharp rattle brought his heart into his mouth as the saying is, and he made a wild jump to avoid stepping on the reptile that lay coiled in his path. It was the third he had seen, and the incident did nothing to improve his state of mind. He knew only too well that one false step would have consequences that could only be fatal.

Telling himself that at all costs he must keep his head, he climbed to the

top of a large boulder to survey the landscape, hoping to see something move—a distant car, a rider, a stray Indian, anything; but all he could see was the same repulsive repetition of rocks and hummocks of sand, cactus and *chaparral*, mesquit and sagebrush, rolling on and on into the shimmering heatwaves of the pitiless distances. The only thing that moved was a buzzard, wheeling high overhead against a sky of steely blue.

He clambered down listlessly and squatted on a rock, his chin in his hands, to think the matter over. Not that he could think clearly, for his head was beginning to ache. He closed his eyes against the glare. If he had any sensation at all it was one of anger that he should find himself in such a predicament. It seemed so unnecessary.

Sitting there, assailed by an awful feeling of loneliness he remembered what an Arab had once told him. In the busy traffic of your cities, he had said, death can strike like the swift blow of an iron axe; but in the silence of the empty desert it comes slowly, like a thief in the night, filling your head with wild dreams that are the madness before the end.

CHAPTER 11

BIGGLES SEES DAYLIGHT

BIGGLES heard the storm in the night. So the overdue rain had arrived at last, he thought, and while he imagined it might be giving Ginger an uncomfortable ride he was not unduly perturbed. It certainly did not occur to him that Ginger might not be able to get through to the border although the rain might slow him down and so delay his return. The storm, it appeared, was only the advance guard of the wet season, for the sun was toiling up as usual from the horizon with the promise of presenting the country with another torrid day.

Looking through the front window he was mildly surprised to see Schultz, with his escort, on the far side of the street talking to Lorenzo. From his manner he seemed to be annoyed about something. Nifty was there, too, from time to time joining in the argument. The Cadillac was not in its usual place outside the tavern but in the middle of the street some twenty yards or so farther on.

While Biggles was dressing he saw Juan arrive. Presently the men all strode over to the hotel. With a feeling that something had happened he quickly finished dressing and went down to find the five men on the *patio* in attitudes that suggested they were waiting for him. This was soon confirmed.

Schultz, with an ugly expression on his face, lost no time in opening the conversation, and his first words more or less explained the situation.

‘Where has your friend gone in the car that does not belong to him?’ he demanded brusquely.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Biggles, to gain time.

‘Last night Brabinsky’s car was stolen,’ challenged Schultz.

‘Indeed? Who says it was stolen?’

‘Mr Brimshawe. Last night he left the car outside his house. This morning it had gone.’

‘So what? Are you suggesting that I stole it?’

‘Yes. I know you tried to buy it.’

‘That’s a dangerous accusation to make,’ warned Biggles. ‘What gives you the idea that I had anything to do with it?’

‘Your friend has gone off in it.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Lorenzo. He filled the tanks with oil and petrol. You were there. You paid. Don’t deny it.’

‘I’ve no intention of denying it because it happens to be true,’ retorted Biggles. ‘But because I filled the petrol tank doesn’t mean that I stole the car.’ He glanced at Nifty, who was looking anywhere but at him. So, he thought, to save his face the treacherous little cockney had said the car had been stolen.

He turned back to Schultz. 'What has this to do with you, anyway? The car isn't yours.'

Schultz ignored the question. To Juan, who was looking from one to the other as if he couldn't understand what all this was about, he said: 'Arrest this man. He has stolen my friend's car.'

Biggles kept his temper. 'You've got a nerve, giving orders to the police,' he said curtly. 'Before you jump to any more conclusions and make a fool of yourself you'd better hear my side of the story.'

Actually, Biggles could see only one course open to him, and that was to state the facts. He had no intention of lying to protect the shifty-eyed Nifty; and he was not prepared to see Ginger on his return arrested for having stolen the car.

Speaking calmly to Juan he said: 'The car was not stolen. *Señor* Brimshawe told us we could borrow it.'

'Why?'

'To allow my friend to go to the United States to get the spare part we need for our own car. He's coming back. He shouldn't be away long.'

'Are we expected to believe that?' sneered Schultz.

'I don't care what you believe,' snapped Biggles.

'Why should Brimshawe allow you to have the car?'

'Because he was stuck here without any money. I paid him two hundred dollars for the hire of it. Now you know. If you doubt that take a look at Brimshawe's face. Ask him to show you his wallet.'

Schultz looked hard at Nifty, but to the cockney's obvious relief ignored the invitation. Turning to Biggles, in a different tone of voice he inquired: 'Where has your friend gone in the car?'

'I told you. To the States.'

'I mean by which road?'

'The same one we took to get here. He'll cross the border at Sonoyta. He should be there by now.'

'I doubt if he got far last night,' put in Juan.

'Why?'

The rain was too heavy for the land to take it. It would run off. Every wash, every *arroyo* and canyon, would be full of water.'

'How long would those conditions last?'

'A few hours, perhaps.'

Schultz said no more. With a sign to his assistants to go with him he strode away to the Cadillac which drove off at high speed.

Juan shrugged. He shook his head. 'You *gringos* are all mad,' he observed, sadly. Having delivered himself of this opinion he walked away.

Biggles, who had stared at the vanishing car in astonishment, turned back to Nifty. 'What are they going to do?' he asked, wonderingly. 'Why all the hurry?'

'Search me,' replied Nifty, still looking uncomfortable. 'I'm sorry I 'ad to

say you pinched the car; but I 'ad to say something, didn't I?"

'Why did you have to say anything?"

'Because I was in the cart good and proper.'

'What are you dithering about?" demanded Biggles. 'What's happened? Come on man, out with it.'

'That lot got back from Hermosillo about an hour ago.'

'What of it?"

'They brought Ritzy with 'em.'

Biggles stared. 'Ah! So that's it. How did they manage that?"

'I dunno and that's a fact,' said Nifty wearily. 'They didn't say. I reckon they must have got 'im out on bail. The first thing Ritzy says when he sees me is, where's the car? What could I say? I told you he didn't even like me or Corny using the blarsted car. He was in such a flaming temper that I daren't tell 'im the truth. I said it must 'ave been pinched. You ought to 'ave seen 'im. He behaved like he'd gone off 'is rocker. I slipped out and came down 'ere to tell Lorenzo to keep 'is mouth shut about what really 'appened 'ere last night; but I was too late; Schultz was 'ere first in the Cadillac and Lorenzo had spilt the beans.'

'Where's Ritzy now?"

'I ain't seen 'im so I suppose he must still be at the villa.'

An alarming thought struck Biggles. 'Did you see him and Schultz do any sort of deal?"

'No.'

'You didn't see Schultz give Ritzy any money?"

'Not while I was there. I told you. All they could talk about was that perishing car.'

'Can you think of any reason why Schultz should tear off as he did just now?"

'Maybe he was scared and decided to pull out.'

'Scared of what?"

'You.'

'Why should he be scared of me?"

'They say you're the Bigglesworth from Scotland Yard.'

'Who told them that?"

'One of Schultz's pals had seen you before somewhere. Is it right?"

'It is.'

'Listen, guvnor,' said Nifty anxiously. 'I didn't do that shooting in London. I'll take me oath on it.'

'Who did?"

'Corny,' It was obvious that Nifty's nerve had given out when he went on: 'I reckon you know what Schultz was 'ere for.'

'I have an idea,' admitted Biggles, seeing that having gone so far there was nothing to be gained by denials. He went on: 'Well, now you see which way the wind blows you'd better make up your mind which side you're on. I can't

promise anything, but if you care to turn Queen's Evidence it may help you when you stand trial, as you will if ever you go back to England. Of course, you may care to spend the rest of your days here —'

'Not me. I'd sooner be in gaol. I reckon it was that rat Tricky Adamson who blew the gaff we was 'ere. I told Ritzy he'd squeal if ever he got 'ome.'

'We brought him home.'

'I suppose he told you Ritzy had still got the sparklers.'

'He did.'

'But he didn't know where they was hid. None of us knew. Ritzy kept that to 'imself.'

'You still don't know?'

'I wouldn't be 'ere if I did,' admitted Nifty, frankly.

'As far as you know Ritzy has still got the diamonds?'

'As far as I know.'

'Then why has Schultz gone?'

'He might be coming back for all I know.'

Biggles was puzzled. The situation was clearing. Some facts were emerging, but there were still some missing. That Ritzy had come to some arrangement with Schultz was almost certain. Now he wanted his own car to get away. That was why he was furious when he found it had gone.

There was no time to lose, and he could see only one way to get the information he wanted.

'I'm going to the villa to see Ritzy,' he told Nifty.

'You be careful what you're up to,' warned Nifty. 'Ritzy's got another gun.'

'We'll see about that,' returned Biggles, and set off up the street with Nifty trailing along behind him like a whipped cur.

Arriving at the villa Biggles walked straight in. He could see no one. 'Ritzy,' he called.

There was no reply.

'Come on, Ritzy, the game's up,' shouted Biggles. 'I want to talk to you.'

There was no answer, but a dusky female appeared from the back premises. '*Señor* Brabinsky not here,' she said.

'Where is he?'

'He gone, *señor*.'

'Gone where?'

'Don't know, *señor*. He went in car.'

'What car?'

'The big blue car, *señor*.'

Biggles spun round to Nifty. 'You heard that! She says he went in the Cadillac. Did you know that?'

'No, guvnor. S'welp me.'

'Did you see him in the car?'

'No. But he might have bin in it, if he was on the floor. Maybe that was

why Schultz put the car where he did, instead of outside Lorenzo's place. I didn't see inside the car.'

'Neither did I.'

'I bet yer that's what happened,' muttered Nifty. 'The dirty twister. Slipped out and left me to carry the can. Just like 'im.'

Understanding dawned in Biggles' eyes. Schultz's sudden departure was explained. He had gone and taken Ritzy with him. If they had both gone it could only mean that the diamonds had gone with them. But there was still one flaw in that theory. That Ritzy, if he was out on bail, would not want to be seen, was understandable. But why had Schultz, if he was heading for the States as presumably he was, bothered to stop to question Lorenzo?

'What are you going to do?' asked Nifty anxiously.

'I don't know,' replied Biggles, grimly, feeling that the diamonds had slipped through his fingers after all. Without a car to follow there was nothing he could do. Never had he felt so helpless.

He left the house. Nifty stayed with him. Walking down the street they met Juan, another policeman with him. Both, conspicuously, wore revolvers.

'If you're looking for Brabinsky he isn't at his house,' Biggles told them.

'After what has happened I didn't think he would be,' answered Juan.

'What has happened?'

'When he escaped at Hermosillo he shot and killed a man.'

'Escaped,' echoed Biggles.

'How he got the pistol we do not know,' explained Juan. 'But the big blue car was in Hermosillo yesterday and the *gringo* who owns it was given permission to see Brabinsky for a minute. He may—'

'How did you learn this?' asked Biggles.

Juan indicated his companion. 'This officer has come on a motor-cycle to bring the news and to look for Brabinsky, and the blue car.'

'The car has gone. It took the road to the border,' informed Biggles.

He was thinking of something else, and thinking fast. So Ritzy had escaped. He had been on the floor of the car when it stopped at Lorenzo's. That left only one question to be answered. Why, if Schultz and Ritzy had been so anxious to get out of the country, as they certainly would be if they had shot a policeman, had they worried about Ritzy's car? Was it because Ritzy wanted the car? Was it because, having either the diamonds or the money that had been paid for them in his pocket, he wasn't keen on travelling with three men who might shoot or abandon him while crossing the desert and so get away with both the money and the diamonds? Ritzy would have felt safer in his own car, with or without Nifty. Not that he would worry about Nifty. Could that be the answer to the question? Did that explain the interest in Ritzy's car? Outside Lorenzo's Schultz had behaved as if the car was vital to him. Why should he be so concerned? If he had got the diamonds...

It was at this point in his efforts to untangle the mystery that Biggles found a loose end; and having found it the knots fell apart. His solution was still

only surmise, but he was sure he was right. Now he understood Ritzy's exasperation when he returned home to find the car was not there. Why he would allow no one to use it but himself.

He looked at Nifty. 'Did Ritzy ever give you the slightest hint of where he might have hidden the stones?'

'No.' Nifty thought for a moment. 'Once, when I asked him what would happen if we had to get away in a hurry, he said I needn't worry about that. When we went the stones would go with us.'

'That,' said Biggles succinctly, 'is exactly what I wanted to know. Didn't it occur to you to wonder what he meant by that?'

'No. Why should it?'

Biggles smiled bitterly. 'Quite. Why should it? I've been as slow in the uptake as you were.'

'You mean — you know where he hid the stuff?'

'I think so.'

'Where?'

'They were somewhere in the car.'

Nifty's jaw sagged foolishly. 'By Cripes! You've got it!' he exclaimed. 'If we 'ad to leave in a hurry—'

'He wouldn't have to dig the stones up out of the garden, or anything like that. They were already in the car. They always were.'

'That must be how he got 'em through the Customs when we crossed the border into Mexico. Me and Corny wondered about that at the time. Do you reckon Schultz knows that?'

'Of course he must know. Why else would he bother about a car that didn't belong to him? That was why he tore off after it. You realize what that means?'

'No.'

'You're not very bright this morning, are you? Have you forgotten that my friend, who also by the way is a detective, is in that car? The storm last night would delay him. Ritzy, Schultz and his gang, are now after him. If they overtake him, no matter on which side of the border, you can imagine what will happen.'

'They'll knock him off.'

'Without the slightest doubt whatever,' said Biggles, grimly. 'Another murder, more or less, can mean nothing to them.'

'It's a good place for one,' opined Nifty, with criminal intelligence.

CHAPTER 12

A FRIEND IN NEED...

BIGGLES stared down the dusty street, trying desperately to think of something he could do. On the face of it, without any form of transport, there seemed to be nothing he could do. Only a fast car might possibly overtake the Cadillac, which would be travelling at top speed to overtake Ginger in Ritzy's car.

The two police officers were still standing there. They had listened to the conversation probably wondering what it was all about, for their knowledge of English, if they had any at all, would be of the soft, southern American drawl. Nifty's clipped, cockney accent, they would not understand at all. Biggles considered suggesting to the officer from Hermosillo that he should go after the Cadillac on his motor-bike; but what good would that do? He would be one against four, and probably get himself shot. He even considered asking the man to lend him his motor-bike. Either way, that would mean explaining the whole situation.

As Biggles gazed helplessly down the sun-drenched road he saw a station wagon, usually called in England a shooting brake, pull up outside the village shop. A man, a slim Mexican by his dress, got out and went into the little store. He thought he recognized José.

'Who does that car belong to?' he asked Juan.

'*Señor José Fonderi,*' was the answer.

Biggles walked quickly down the street. He reached the brake as José came out of the shop with a bag of provisions.

'May I have a word with you, *señor?*' asked Biggles.

'With pleasure, *señor,*' said José, putting his bag in the back of the brake.

'May I borrow your car? It might be a matter of life or death for my friend, the young man you've seen with me.'

José looked astonished by the request, as well he might; and his reply was the natural one. 'Why do you want my car?'

'It's of vital importance that I overtake the blue Cadillac you've seen about, now on its way to Sonoyta. Brabinsky is thought to be in it,' answered Biggles.

'But he's in prison in Hermosillo!'

'He was. Last night he escaped and came here. He shot a policeman. He is now in pursuit of my friend. If he overtakes him he'll probably shoot him, too.'

'I don't know what's been going on, or what you're doing here,' returned José. 'But one good turn deserves another so get in. I'll drive you myself.'

That's very kind of you, but I don't like to put you to that trouble,' said Biggles. 'But for the fact that my own car is out of order —'

‘Never mind. Let us go. I’ll drive. I know this car and what it will do on these desert roads better than you do.’

They got in and Jose set off. ‘How long has the Cadillac been on the road?’ he asked.

‘About an hour.’

‘We might just catch it. Having lived here all my life I know many short cuts to Sonoyta. My business — I have a ranch — often takes me over the border. When I was a boy Indians showed me where the sand is hard and may be trusted.’

‘Good,’ said Biggles. ‘If those men in the Cadillac reach the frontier before us we’re likely to lose them unless I call on the United States police for help, and I’d rather not do that yet, if it can be avoided. You say you don’t know what all this is about, so I’d better tell you. You will then understand exactly the position I’m in.’

Then, as the brake raced on across the inhospitable landscape, often leaving the road for the open *mesa* where the mesquit and cactus were more widely spaced, Biggles told his companion who he was and gave him an outline of his reason for being in Mexico. He told him all that had happened since his arrival, which meant, of course, revealing the character of the men in the Cadillac. In view of the help he was receiving, and probable danger if the blue car was encountered, he felt he couldn’t do less.

The only signs of the overnight storm were occasional spots where the sand was sticky, but even these became fewer as the sun mounted.

‘I was always suspicious of those men,’ said José. ‘I thought they were up to no good. I told Juan some time ago that they might be criminals on the run from the United States. As you may know, many make for the border when the police are after them. I have no wish to see my country become a haven of refuge for crooks. They think they can do what they like here, but they are wrong.’

While José drove, Biggles kept a sharp look-out for the Cadillac; but they were seldom on the actual road and nothing was seen of it. When the red, white and green-painted frontier post appeared, marking the Mexican side of the border, they still hadn’t seen it. The Stars and Stripes of the United States were conspicuous a little farther on. No cars were to be seen.

‘Don’t give up hope,’ said José, cheerfully. ‘We might be here first. The way I came there were several places where we might have passed the Cadillac, striking the road in front of it without seeing it. I will make inquiries.’

So saying he brought the brake to a stop at the frontier buildings where a number of men in Mexican uniforms were standing. On both sides was a barbed wire fence. He jumped out and was soon in rapid conversation with the officer in charge. After some minutes he returned, looking puzzled.

‘This is a strange thing,’ he told Biggles. ‘You say your friend was in an Overland.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, it hasn’t arrived here. In fact, they tell me that no car of any sort has entered the States from this post for some days.’

With Biggles staring in surprise José went on. The Cadillac was here some minutes ago. Schultz couldn’t have seen the Overland either, because when he was told it hadn’t arrived he turned round and went back.’

Biggles looked bewildered. ‘He went *back*?’

‘That’s what they tell me. I’m afraid I made a mistake in leaving the road, but I was concentrating on speed. Had we been on the road we must have seen it. By travelling cross-country we missed it.’

‘What on earth could have happened? If Ginger — that’s my friend — was on the road with a breakdown, Schultz couldn’t have missed him.’

‘Obviously, your friend could not have been on the road. From what you have told me that may have been a good thing for him. Schultz has gone back to look for him — or rather, the car, and what is in it.’

‘If Ginger wandered off the road on to the *mesa*, and that’s what must have happened, what are Schultz’s chances of finding him?’

‘Very small, I’d say. That goes for us, too. It depends, of course, on how far the Overland got off the road. Anything could have happened. The car might have fallen into a canyon, or an *arroyo*.’

‘In which case Ginger might be lying somewhere in the desert, injured.’

‘That is a possibility,’ agreed José. ‘On the other hand, if he was not hurt he might abandon the car and walk back to Eltora — that is, if he could find his way.’

‘He must have got off the road in that storm,’ muttered Biggles.

‘Probably.’

‘What are the chances of him being found?’

José shrugged. ‘You’ve seen the desert. You know what it’s like. If I was at my *hacienda* I would turn out all my *vaqueros* to look for him. They know the desert.’

‘By the time we got to your ranch it would be too late.’

‘I’m afraid so. Only an Indian, who knows the secret water holes, could live long in the desert without water. This sun is a killer. Last night every depression would be full of water, and every *arroyo* a raging torrent. But not now, as you yourself must have seen as we came here.’

Biggles moistened his lips. ‘And if Schultz finds that car he’ll shoot Ginger. All he wants is the diamonds.’

‘It may not be as bad as that. Ginger may already be back in Eltora.’

‘If he isn’t, he’s likely to die in the desert. Don’t you think we’d better try to find him?’

José looked dubious. ‘Between here and the Magdalena River lie thousands of square miles of some of the worst country on earth. To search all that area, even with several men on horses, would be a formidable task. It couldn’t be done on foot, or even in a car like mine, which is designed for rough going.’

‘What I want,’ said Biggles, ‘is a plane.’

‘I don’t know of any near here.’

Biggles looked at the frontier post. ‘Have they a telephone there?’

‘The Americans have one on their side, although I believe it’s for official use only.’

‘That would be even better if they’d let me use it.’

‘What are you thinking of doing?’

‘I have friends in San Francisco who are pilots. If I could get in touch with them I’d ask them to hire a plane, fly down and start searching the desert for a few miles on both sides of the road. They could be here in an hour or two. We could dash back to Eltora to see if Ginger is there. If he isn’t we’ll come back and watch the plane. If it found Ginger it could show us where he is.’

‘A plane would certainly be the answer to the question.’

‘Then let’s do it. Will you ask your Mexican friends if they mind me walking across to the American side? If you stay here with the brake they’ll know I’m not up to any funny business.’

‘Don’t worry about that. They know me well. Wait here a moment.’

José had no difficulty in getting permission for Biggles to walk across the frontier so he hurried over. Having explained the position, that a man, a friend, was lost in the desert, he found the American guards most co-operative. Indeed, they put the call through for him as top priority; but even so, it was twenty minutes before Biggles was actually talking to Algy at his hotel. It took him another ten minutes to explain what had happened and tell him exactly what he wanted him to do. Algy said he understood. If he spotted Ginger, or the car, he would circle over the place.

Feeling better and satisfied that he had done everything humanly possible, Biggles hurried back to José.

‘That’s okay,’ he told him. ‘They’re flying down as fast as they can get here. That’ll take a little time, so rather than wait here I suggest we get back to Eltora to see if Ginger is there. There would be no point in letting the plane spend the rest of the day searching the desert if he isn’t there. So let’s get back to Eltora by the fastest route you know.’

‘By the short cuts?’

‘Yes. Speed is everything now.’

‘What happens if we should see the Cadillac? There’s a chance we might, when we are on or near the road.’

‘In that case what I would do would depend on what the Cadillac is doing. If it’s coming this way I shall stop it, because that could mean Schultz had found the Overland, got what he wanted, and was on the way out. I shall want to know where he found the missing car and what he has done to Ginger. If there’s an argument you’d better keep out of it. These men carry guns.’

‘You seem to forget I also carry a gun,’ said José, as the brake raced away on its return journey to Eltora.

1 Horse-mounted livestock herders: the Mexican equivalent of cowboys.

CHAPTER 13

LOST AND FOUND

GINGER, lost in the apparently waterless waste of the *mesa*, had a stroke of luck; or, to be fair, it could be said that his determination not to give up was rewarded.

As the shock of the realization of what had happened to him wore off he saw clearly that if he was not to perish it would have to be by his own efforts. It was no use sitting still waiting for help. Biggles, he supposed, would be on the *patio* of the *posada* awaiting his return from the United States, and without any suspicion of what had happened might wait for days before he became alarmed.

Getting to his feet Ginger stood on the top of an outcrop of sun-bleached rock and surveyed the landscape. The rock was not very high, only a few feet, but it did at least raise his head above the level of the interminable mesquit. What he saw was what he expected to see, nothing but the same monotonous picture of rock, sand, mesquit and cactus rolling away on all sides to the quivering horizon. There was not a living creature, man or beast, in view. Even the buzzard had disappeared.

What he did notice was a *butte*, one of those isolated mounds of rock, common in the Western districts of America, caused by erosion of the surrounding soil. It was as big as a house, and no great distance away. If he could get to the top he would have a much wider view. He decided to try it. It would be better than wandering about hoping by mere chance to strike the *arroyo* in which he had left the car. That was what he wanted to find, for if he could locate the car there would be water in the radiator. It would be foul, but he was in no state to be particular.

Keeping a wary eye open for snakes he threaded his way through grotesque desert growths to the new objective. When he reached it he saw that it was genuine rock, not the soft, porous stuff of which most of the loose boulders were composed. He also saw that it was not going to be easy to climb. Moreover, exposed to the full force of the sun it was hot. Going round to the shady side, for the sun had not yet reached its zenith, he discovered that a fissure, really little more than a crack, had split the mass from the top almost to the bottom. It ended in a rough depression, an irregular-shaped trough. The trough was nearly full of water, water which obviously had during the storm found its way into the crack and trickled to the bottom. There it had been caught and held, and had not had time to evaporate. In a moment he was drinking, burying his face in the cool liquid.

Having drunk his fill, feeling wonderfully refreshed, he considered what he should do next. He had no container of any sort to carry water, and he was loath to leave the spot for fear he might be unable to find it again. The *butte*

was a conspicuous landmark, but it was not the only one. He could see others, admittedly some distance away, but he had learned his lesson and was no longer prepared to trust his judgment in the matter of finding that particular rock again should he leave it. The thing to do, he decided, was to mark it.

Looking around he found a stick, actually a piece of a root of some long-dead tree, as white as a bone from years of exposure. To one end of this he tied his handkerchief, and with the makeshift marker in his hand made a somewhat perilous ascent to the top of the rock. There, finding a cranny, he wedged the end of the stick into it so that it stood upright. To make quite sure it wouldn't fall he supported it with some loose pieces of rock. This done he straightened his back and looked around.

As he had anticipated, he now had a good view of the country, although except close at hand it was blurred by haze and shimmering heatwaves. A wavering line looked as if it might be the *arroyo*, but he forgot it when a movement caught his eye. Less than half a mile away, heading north, apparently across the open desert, was a car. He recognized it instantly, and beyond doubt. It was the blue Cadillac.

For a moment Ginger stared. He could not see the road, but he realized the Cadillac must be on it. He did not waste time wondering what it was doing or where it was going. As far as he was concerned it was a car, and a car meant salvation. In another moment he was scrambling in desperate haste to the ground. He took the last few feet in one jump and raced on, taking a course which he hoped would intercept the vehicle.

In this he failed. He was still two hundred yards short when the Cadillac, travelling at high speed, went past. He yelled and waved his arms, but it was no use. The people in the car didn't see him, or if they did they took no notice. With a frown of chagrin on his face he stood and watched the car disappear into the haze. Then he walked on, and in a few minutes came to the road. He consoled himself with the thought that if he had missed the car he had at least found the road, which was something. It was rarely used, but while he was on it there was always a chance of a traveller coming along, perhaps an odd *vaquero*, or a party of Indians.

He now had time to think. The Cadillac was obviously making for the border, for there was no other possible intermediate objective. Why? Why was it going to Sonoyta? The answer was not hard to find. Schultz had got what he had come for and, his mission achieved, was now on the way out.

Ginger's heart sank as the thought struck him that Biggles must have failed. He could arrive at no other possible conclusion. What was Biggles doing? Why had he allowed Schultz to get away? Now that Schultz had gone, what could Biggles do? Without a car, apparently nothing. He imagined Biggles helpless and frustrated waiting at the hotel. The sooner he got back there, he thought disconsolately, the better.

He set off along the road to Eltora. With the track looking the same everywhere he did not know exactly how far he had to go, but he reckoned he

had a walk of not less than ten miles in front of him — far enough in the sizzling heat, he thought.

He met one man on the road, an old, ragged greybeard, with a donkey laden with a tarpaulin-covered pack, a pick and a shovel. Ginger spoke to him. He turned out to be an American, a professional prospector. He was on his way to the States, having, as he said with a lurid oath, had enough of Mexico. The tales he had heard of gold in the hills was bunk.

He gave Ginger a drink from his canteen. He could do no more, for they were travelling in opposite directions. So after thanking him for the drink Ginger went on his way, unaware that the old man was to be a vital if unwitting factor in his affairs.

It was mid afternoon when, leg-weary and thirsty, he stumbled down the last hill into Eltora. He went straight to the *posada* expecting to find Biggles on the *patio*. Failing to find him he shouted for Pepe and a jug of orange juice. Pepe brought the beverage but could give him no information about Biggles. He wasn't even sure when he had last seen him, but he thought not since early morning.

Ginger of course had not the remotest idea of what had happened in his absence. After a rest, seeking information, he went to see Juan. He found him at home, sleeping through the heat of the day. He was not at all pleased at being disturbed, and told Ginger, somewhat sulkily, that Biggles had gone off with José in José's station wagon.

A confused conversation followed. At first, Ginger, whose Spanish was far from good, could not make head nor tail of what Juan was trying to tell him; indeed, it dawned on him that Juan himself didn't really know what had happened. The salient facts seemed to be, Ritzy had escaped from prison. Schultz and his party had gone, heading for the States. Biggles, in Josh's car, had gone after them.

'I saw the Cadillac,' Ginger said. 'I tried to stop it, but it went past before I could reach it. But I didn't see any other car. Had there been one behind I should have seen it, because after that I was never off the road.'

'*Señor* José doesn't follow the road all the way to Sonoyta,' explained Juan. 'He knows every bush and stone in the desert and has some short ways of reaching the border.'

'I see,' muttered Ginger. 'If *Señor* José didn't follow the road the car could have passed me without my seeing it.'

That, Juan agreed, was what must have happened. And with that he retired to his interrupted siesta.

Ginger made his way back to the inn, and taking a seat on the *patio* tried to work out what had really happened. It was not easy. Indeed, it seemed to him that everything had ended in a complete mess. The most unfortunate part of it all was that Biggles would naturally suppose that he, Ginger, was somewhere in front of him. There was nothing he could do about it, he decided. Absolutely nothing. He would just have to sit there and wait for Biggles to

come back, although how long that would be was in the air. As it was some time since he had anything to eat he got Pepe to make him an omelette, which arrived as usual so seasoned with pepper that it seemed to set his mouth on fire.

He had half sunk into a doze when the sound of a car approaching made him sit up and open his eyes. To his utter astonishment he saw the familiar blue Cadillac. It swung round in front of the inn and came to a stop in a swirl of dust. Ginger had convinced himself it must be a twin to the car he knew when Schultz and one of his men jumped out. The other remained at the wheel, the engine running.

Ginger, his brain in a turmoil wondering what could have brought them back, was soon to know.

Schultz came straight up to him. 'What have you done with Brabinsky's car?' he rasped.

'What makes you think I've done anything with it?' asked Ginger, striving to get a grip on the situation.

'We know you went off in it last night. You've just come back without it.'

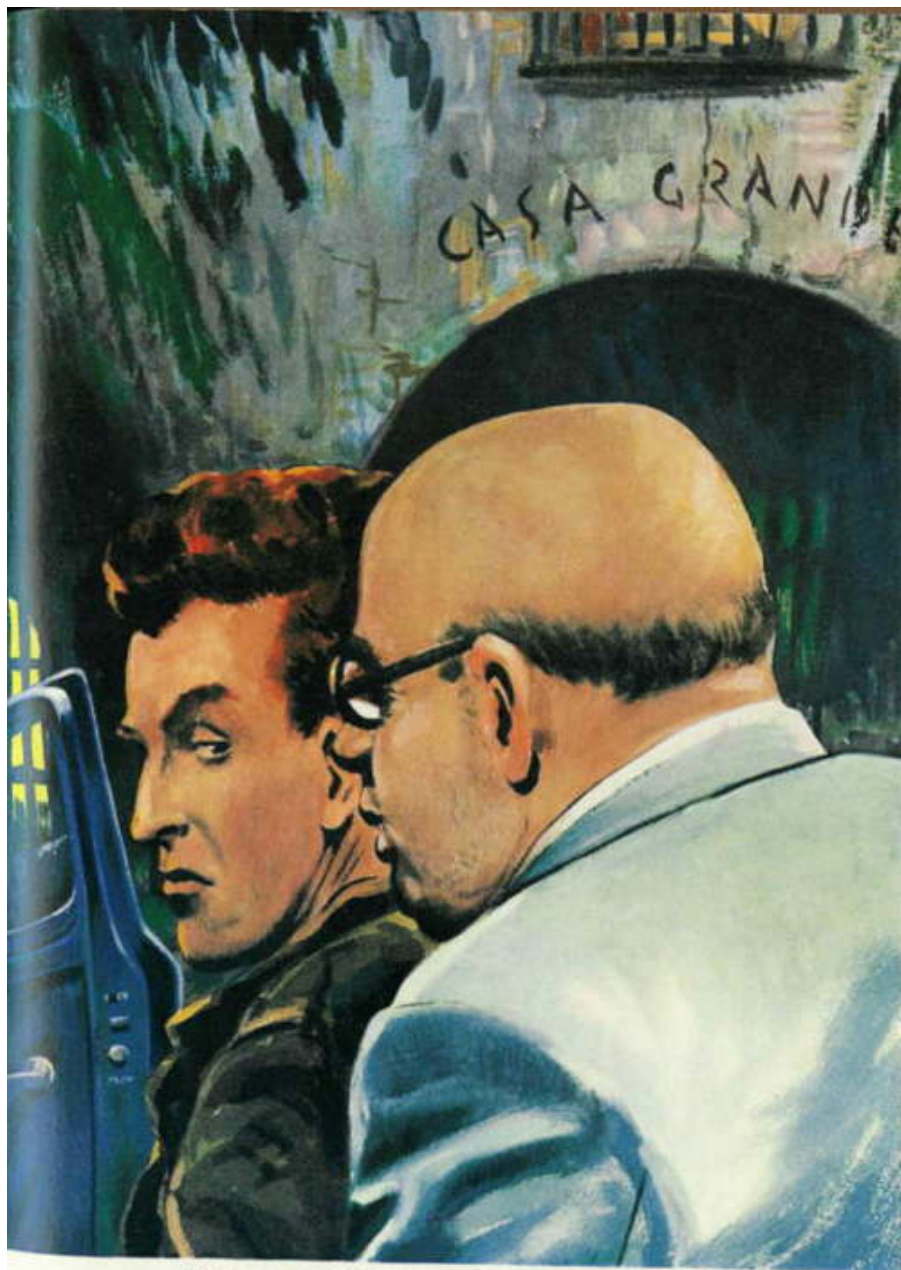
'Who told you that?'

'An old man we met on the road. He told us he saw you walking here.'

So that was it, thought Ginger. The old prospector had told them he had seen him. He would, naturally, if he was asked the question.

'I don't know where Brabinsky's car is,' said Ginger. 'It's true I had it last night, but I got off the road in the storm and had to abandon it. That's why I walked back.'

'Get in my car,' ordered Schultz.



'Get in my car,' ordered Schultz (page 141)

Ginger found himself staring into the muzzle of an automatic.

'What's the idea?' he asked.

'You'll find out. Do as you are told. Get in or I'll shoot you where you sit, Englander. I know why you're here.'

'If it's Brabinsky's car you want, I have no more idea—'

‘Get in. Don’t argue.’

Ginger shrugged. He glanced up and down the street. There was nobody in sight. Pepe and his wife, he knew, always slept at that hour. Seeing that Schultz was in no mood for argument he got up and walked to the car.

His brain was still spinning. He could not imagine why Schultz was so anxious to find Brabinsky’s car. He didn’t know what Biggles knew, or at all events suspected, that the diamonds were in it. It was all a mystery. But if Schultz wanted Brabinsky’s car, as far as he was concerned he could have it — if it could be found.

He was bundled into the Cadillac. The doors slammed and away it went at full speed. It did not go far. At the top of the hill on the edge of the desert, it stopped. Ritzy appeared from behind a bush, apparently not having dared to show himself in Eltora. He, too, got into the car which at once continued on over the desert road.

Ritzy glared at Ginger. ‘Where’s my car?’

‘I’ve already told these pals of yours I’ve no more idea of where it is than they have. I got off the road in the night, during the storm. The lights failed and I wandered about all over the place before finishing up in three feet of water at the bottom of a gully.’

‘You’d better think better than that,’ said Ritzy, savagely.

‘What’s all the fuss about, anyway?’ asked Ginger. ‘Why are you so anxious to have the car? We hired it in good faith. I’ve no doubt my friend will pay for it when he comes back.’

‘Where’s he gone?’

‘How would I know? I spent the night out there in the desert. I lost my way. I lost the car. I only found my way back to the road because I saw this car on it. I had to walk back to Eltora. That old man saw me. When I got there my friend had gone. That’s all I know. You can please yourselves whether you believe it or not.’

The men in the car exchanged glances as if they were inclined to think Ginger might be telling the truth. He had spoken firmly, as if he meant every word he had said — as indeed he did.

Ritzy spoke in a different tone of voice. ‘I’m very attached to that particular car and I’d be very sorry to lose it.’

‘In that case I’ll do my best to help you to find it,’ returned Ginger. ‘I must admit it’s your car. But even if we locate it I’m afraid you’ll find it in pretty poor shape. It got knocked about a bit in the dark, and as I told you, it finished up by getting waterlogged. When the water went down it was up to the chassis in sand.’

‘Where do you reckon you left the road?’

‘As near as I can judge it would be three or four miles farther on. There’s a bit of a depression, a dry wash. We stuck in the sand there on the way out.’

The car went on in silence.

‘I’m not sure, but I think this must be the place,’ said Ginger, when he

came to the spot he had indicated.

‘Let us get out and look,’ said Schultz. ‘Take the car off the road in case someone comes along,’ he told the driver. ‘We don’t want anyone to see it.’

The car was driven a short distance from the road and parked out of sight behind a mass of prickly pear. As this was done Ginger looked down the road with a wild hope that he might see Biggles coming back, for that, he felt sure, was what he would do when he learned that the Overland had not crossed the border. Knowing a register was kept there he would be certain to make inquiries. His fear was that José’s brake would take the short cuts mentioned by Juan, in which case it would again go past without seeing him. Actually, although he didn’t know it, which was as well for his peace of mind, this is what did happen. He consoled himself with the thought that Biggles must know by now that if he hadn’t reached Sonoyta he must be at some intermediate point.

They all got out of the car. The sun was now sinking in the west, but the heat was probably at its worst, being flung off by everything that had absorbed it at high noon.

‘Now, which way?’ demanded Ritzy. ‘Get a move on. We shall get sunstroke if we stand here.’

‘I’m pretty sure I left the track on the left hand side,’ said Ginger who, in all innocence, was seriously trying to find the lost car and so put an end to the whole tiresome business.

Leaving the car as it stood the whole party, looking around, moved slowly into the *chaparral*. But Ginger was completely at a loss, and presently had to admit that he hadn’t the faintest idea of where he was or which way to go.

Schultz scowled. ‘Are you trying to fool us?’

‘Of course not,’ protested Ginger. ‘Why should I? I’m as anxious to find the car as you are. I thought there was a chance we might see wheel marks in the sand, but I can only imagine they must have been washed out by the rain. It came down in buckets.’

‘This is no use,’ muttered Schultz after a time. ‘We could go on for weeks at this rate without finding it.’ He was sweating profusely. ‘This young fool knows nothing. We might as well get rid of him and go back to Eltora. No one would find him here. We could come back in the early morning when it won’t be as hot as this.’

For the first time Ginger realized the dangerous position he was in. Schultz wasn’t bluffing. He had spoken casually, but obviously meant every word he said.

But this cold-blooded suggestion did not meet with Ritzy’s approval, although it was evident that he was thinking of himself, not of Ginger. ‘I can’t go back to Eltora, you know that,’ he objected. ‘You do what you like. Shoot this snooper if you feel like it, but I’m not aiming to spend the rest of my life in a Mexican gaol.’

The word snooper gave Ginger a shock. In what sense had it been used?

Was it to be taken literally? Could it mean that Ritzy knew who he was; had known all along what he and Biggles were doing in Eltora? No, he decided. That wasn't possible.

He could well understand Ritzy's reluctance to return to Eltora, or go anywhere near it. The shooting of Cornelli was one thing. His escape, and the death of a Mexican policeman was another. He could also appreciate Schultz's disinclination to wander about the *mesa* in the suffocating heat on the off-chance of coming upon the missing car. He had noticed a distant object and decided his best plan was to play for time. Delaying tactics might not serve any useful purpose in the long run, but they would postpone what he could see was on the way.

He pointed. 'See that *butte*?'

'What about it?'

There's a stick on the top of it, with a piece of what looks like white rag.'

'Well?'

'That's my handkerchief. I put it there this morning to mark that particular spot because there's a pool of rainwater at the bottom of it. I was desperate for water at the time. The car can't be far from that *butte*. From the top I could see the *arroyo* — or I thought I could although I couldn't swear it's the one the car's in.'

'You didn't go back to it?'

'No. I spotted your Cadillac and ran hoping to intercept it, but you were going too fast for me.'

'You think it's worth walking over to this *arroyo*?'

'I do.'

'Then let us go,' said Schultz. 'If we can finish this business tonight so much the better.'

'We shall have to go to the *butte* first to mark the right direction,' advised Ginger. 'It's easy to get lost in this stuff as I discovered this morning, but from my flag there should be no risk of that.'

They set off towards the landmark.

CHAPTER 14

EXIT RITZY

As they picked their way through the irregular patches of desert vegetation the sound of an aircraft in the distance reached Ginger's ears. Presently he could see it, a speck above the northern skyline. He watched it, as well as he was able to, purely as a matter of casual interest, wondering vaguely what it was doing. He made it out to be flying up and down as if on a photographic reconnaissance, but came to the conclusion it was on a routine boundary patrol, possibly checking the border fence. That it might in some way be concerned with him, personally, was a thought that did not for an instant occur to him.

They reached the *butte*. Ginger revealed the position of the water and they all took a drink. Said Ritzy, looking at the horizon: 'What's that plane doing?'

'What does it matter?' answered Schultz. 'It has nothing to do with us. Let us get on, or we shall still be here when the sun goes down.'

Ritzy himself, either not trusting Ginger or being over-eager, went himself to the top of the rock. 'There it is,' he shouted down, pointing.

'Can you see the car?' called Schultz.

'No, but I can see what looks like an *arroyo*. It's the only one. That must be it.' He came scrambling down. 'It isn't ten minutes' walk away,' he said.

The party again moved off, now in the direction indicated.

Ritzy wasn't far out in the matter of distance, but they struck the gully at a point where the sides were almost sheer.

'It couldn't have been here or I would have been knocked out in the crash,' Ginger pointed out, perhaps unnecessarily.

With one accord they walked along the rim of the *arroyo* towards the nearest point where the sheer face broke down to a rather steep slope; and there at the bottom, embedded in sand, was the car.

'*Goot*,' said Schultz, with deep satisfaction.

Footsteps quickened, and reaching the point opposite the car they all slid down the loose sand to the bottom.

Ginger was thinking how lucky he was that the car had not overturned when it had gone over the edge, for if it had he would probably have been drowned in the flood, when Schultz made a remark that put all such ideas out of his head. Understanding burst upon him. The anxiety to find the car was explained.

'Okay,' said Schultz, speaking to Ritzy. 'Get the stones. Don't waste time.'

Ginger could have kicked himself, as the saying is. So that was it, he thought bitterly. The diamonds had been in the car all the time. And he had helped the crooks to find it. What a fool he had been! What a fool! He should have guessed.

Ritzzy spoke, and again the words brought enlightenment. 'Not so fast,' he said suspiciously. 'What about paying for 'em?'

From this it was clear that Schultz still had the money. The transaction had not been completed.

'I'll pay for the stones when I've seen them,' said Schultz, not unreasonably, Ginger thought.

'What guarantee have I you'll pay a fair price?'

'You'll take what I offer, or maybe you get nothing,' stated Schultz, with an edge to his voice. 'Fetch the stones.'

Ritzzy hesitated. It was clear to Ginger that he was not at all happy about the position in which he now found himself. He was one against three; and they were not in Eltora; they were in the desert, where either side, playing false, would find it easy to get away with murder.

Ginger could smell trouble brewing. From what he knew of Schultz he was the sort of man who would think nothing of keeping the diamonds and the money. There appeared to be nothing to prevent him from doing that. Ritzzy must have realized it too.

Far away the plane was still circling, but no one seemed to notice it. Without interest Ginger identified it as an American Piper Cub.

'What do you call a fair price?' asked Ritzzy. 'You know what the stuff is worth. The stones were valued at—'

'I know what they're worth for insurance purposes,' broke in Schultz impatiently, 'Remember, I have to take risks of losing the lot getting them through Customs.'

'I thought you'd try to cut the price by raising that argument. How do I know you've got the money?'

'I have the money,' answered Schultz, speaking in the dangerously low voice of a man trying to keep his temper.

'Let's see the colour of it,' demanded Ritzzy — foolishly, Ginger thought, seeing how things were going. He was pressing Schultz too hard.

Schultz drew a deep breath, but he kept himself in hand.

'He wants to see the money, Karl; show it to him,' he said to the man carrying the portfolio.

The man opened the bag to reveal wads of notes. American dollar bills.

Still Ritzzy hesitated.

Schultz looked at him with half closed eyes. 'Why need I pay anything?' he said softly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'I hold the cards, Brabinsky, and it's time you realized it.' As he finished speaking Schultz made a sign to his assistants.

Automatics appeared in their hands.

'Now do you see,' said Schultz, succinctly.

Ritzzy's face paled. He must have seen, as plainly as Ginger could see, how matters stood. He must have realized, too, that once he divulged the hiding

place of the diamonds he would have lost the game by parting with his only trump card.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ he said. ‘You don’t trust me and I don’t trust you. Give me a hundred thousand dollars. Then let me get to the top of the bank and I’ll shout and tell you where the stones are,’ he suggested.

But Schultz was not having this, which did not surprise Ginger, for it was plain that once he was out of range of the pistols there would be nothing to prevent Ritzy from bolting into the *chaparral* where there would be small chance of finding him. He would take his secret with him, of course.

‘Perhaps you think we couldn’t find the stones without your help,’ sneered Schultz.

‘You’d have a job,’ retorted Ritzy.

‘If necessary I could pull the car to pieces.’

‘Okay: if that’s how you feel, go ahead. You’d better get started. It’ll be dark before you’re finished.’ Ritzy sat on a hummock of sand and lit a cigarette.

He was still holding his trump card. Ginger wondered how long it would last.

Schultz set about carrying out his threat. He himself took no actual part in the search but stood near Ritzy, covering him with a pistol, while his two assistants set about ransacking the car. They failed to find the gems, which did not surprise Ginger in the least, for had they been easy to find Ritzy would not have been so confident.

The men thoroughly examined the boot. They looked under the engine cowlings. They then set about the seats, cutting the cushions with knives and tearing out the stuffing. They got out the tools and ripped up the floorboards.

‘Keep going,’ scoffed Ritzy. ‘You’re so smart.’

In twenty minutes the wreck of the car was complete, and the searchers, baffled, desisted.

With what morbid fascination Ginger watched this incredible game being played out can be better imagined than described. All he could think was, what fools men were when their dominant characteristic was greed. There was plenty of money for both of them, yet they were not satisfied. Each wanted the lot. He had a suspicion that Schultz never had the slightest intention of parting with the money he had brought. He might hand over the diamonds to the people who had financed him, saying he had paid for them, having kept the money and put it in a safe place. He had once made such a suggestion to von Stalhein, Ginger recalled, for Biggles had told him about that operation.

Ginger did, of course, more than once consider making a bolt for it, but there were two reasons against that. Firstly, while Schultz appeared to be taking no notice of him he knew he was being watched, and while he was scrambling up the loose sandy bank of the *arroyo* he would be an easy mark. Secondly, he thought he ought to see the end of the affair, to learn who finally got the diamonds. When that was settled would be the time to attempt an

escape. He glanced up. The plane was nearer now, still circling.

Schultz's patience came suddenly to an end. He lost his temper, not noisily, with shouting, but with what was more menacing, a deadly calm. At a distance of two yards he pointed the pistol at Ritzy's head. 'We've wasted enough time,' he said softly. 'You have one minute to produce the diamonds. If you fail to do so I shall shoot you dead and then take my time cutting the car to pieces. I don't mind if it takes a month. I shall find the diamonds.'

Ritzy knew his time had come. He knew that Schultz meant what he said. Ginger knew it. They all knew it.

'Okay,' muttered Ritzy. 'They're in the tyre.'

'Which one?'

The front right hand side.'

The men went to work. Before they could get to the tyre they had to dig the sand away from it, and having no tool but their hands there was a good deal of cursing as they pricked their fingers on stray cactus needles. However, they got the wheel clear and then took it off. They then proceeded, not without difficulty, to cut the tyre open with their knives. This produced nothing so they slashed the tube to ribbons. This produced nothing, either.

Schultz nearly choked.

As for Ritzy, he was either genuinely astonished or else he was a remarkably good actor, thought Ginger.

'I don't get it,' said Ritzy, getting up to look. 'I could have sworn I put 'em in that tyre. But I must have made a mistake. It must have been the other one.'

'How were they put in?' asked Schultz.

'I took the outer cover off and fastened the packets to the inside with adhesive tape. That's how I got 'em across the border through Customs. They couldn't move. The inner tube would hold 'em in place even if the tape came unstuck.'

By this time the men were working on the other front wheel. They scooped away the sand as before, removed the wheel and cut open the tyre. There was nothing in it.

'Are you sure you didn't put them in one of the back wheels?' asked Schultz, with venomous sarcasm.

Ritzy looked nonplussed. 'I couldn't have made a mistake like that. Of course, it's some time since I put 'em in, but I could have sworn it was that offside front wheel.'

'Are you sure the diamonds are here at all?' asked Schultz, in a thin voice. He was white to the lips with suppressed fury.

'Use your head,' growled Ritzy. 'Would I be such a fool as to waste my time traipsing about this blistering desert looking for the car if the diamonds weren't in it? Don't forget I've a better reason than you for wanting to get out of this country in a hurry.'

This argument made sense, or so it seemed to Ginger, and apparently, also, to Schultz, for he gave orders for the back tyres to be taken off. Ritzy now

helped with the work, which at least lent colour to his statement. He would hardly show enthusiasm for a task which he knew was futile, pondered Ginger.

Again he looked up. The plane was still flying up and down, to and fro across the road, always getting nearer. The hum of its engine was constantly in his ears.

‘What’s that plane doing?’ asked Ritzy, once.

‘Never mind the plane,’ returned Schultz, tersely. ‘It has nothing to do with us. How could it? Get on with the job.’

‘I thought it might be looking for me, that’s all,’ muttered Ritzy. ‘If the pilot spots the car standing near the road he may wonder what it’s doing there.’

‘Let him wonder. There’s nowhere near he can land to find out.’

The work continued in the lurid orange glow of a sun nearly resting on the horizon.

Presently Ritzy said: ‘If the stones aren’t in either of these tyres they must be in the spare wheel.’

‘*Der Teufel!* You’d know if you’d put them in the spare, wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, but my friends used this car as well as me, don’t forget,’ answered Ritzy, removing a thorn from a bleeding finger. ‘One of ‘em might have had a puncture and changed over without saying anything to me about it.’

At the word puncture a bell seemed to ring in Ginger’s head. In the drama of events he had forgotten that he had had a puncture on the road just before the storm broke. He had changed the wheel, using, of course, the spare. The puncture had been in the front right-hand tyre. In a flash he understood what had happened. Ritzy had probably spoken the truth. The diamonds were now on the spare wheel bracket. He, and he alone of the men there, knew the secret of the missing stones. The danger of holding that vital piece of information did not escape him.

He looked at the car for the spare wheel. It was not where it should be. He couldn’t see it. What had happened to it? Had he, after changing the wheel, forgotten to put it on? Had it fallen off, or been knocked off, in one of his several collisions, with *sagueros* and the like, after he had gone off the road?

He tried to think, going over in his mind exactly what he had done throughout the procedure of changing the wheel. He remembered jacking up the car and removing the damaged wheel. He remembered fetching the spare. He remembered that distinctly, for the clip was a type new to him and in the dark he had had rather a job to get it off. He remembered putting it on and removing the jack. But try as he would he could not recollect actually putting the damaged wheel on the bracket, or putting the disc on the new wheel. He had a vague recollection of seeing the disc slide down the bank. But then, he pondered, he wouldn’t necessarily remember what was, after all, an automatic, mechanical action. Only this was certain: the wheel containing the stones was either lying beside the road where he had left it, or it was

somewhere on the *mesa* between the road and the place where the dismantled car now lay.

What worried him was, presently one of the men was bound to notice that the spare wheel was missing. Had they not been so engrossed in what they were doing, with only diamonds on their minds, they must have noticed it already. What was going to happen when the discovery was made? What was he to say? Plead ignorance or tell the truth?

He waited.

The rear wheels now lay on the ground, their tyres in shreds. Ritzy stared helplessly. Schultz and his helpers stood close together, looking at him. Their expressions were ominous. To Ginger the tension was like waiting for a bomb to burst. No one took the slightest notice of the aircraft roaring low overhead.

Then the bomb burst.

It was Ritzy who noticed that the spare wheel was missing. 'Just a minute,' he cried shrilly. 'Where's the spare wheel?'

'Are you sure there was one?' inquired Schultz, coldly.

'Am I sure? Of course I'm sure! Do you think I'd be so daft as to travel in country like this, on these sort of roads, without a spare? The last time I saw this car the spare wheel was on it.'

Schultz's lips curled. 'That's enough,' he grated. 'He's lying.' He made a signal. 'Let him have it.'

The two men raised their guns and took deliberate aim.

'Just a minute,' Ginger found himself saying. 'If you're looking for the spare wheel I can explain that.'

In thus betraying himself to save a man who was not only a crook but one who had committed murder, Ginger felt he was behaving foolishly. Ritzy meant nothing to him. But something in him recoiled from just standing there, watching a man shot in cold blood for something for which he was not responsible. Whatever the consequences Ginger felt he could not allow that to happen. Not that he really thought about it. The words he had spoken had come instinctively to his lips. He was convinced that Ritzy had told the truth when he had said the diamonds were in the tyre. They should have been, and it was not Ritzy's fault that they were not.

All the attention was now on Ginger.

'What do you know about it?' asked Schultz. He had to speak loudly to make himself heard above the noise of the aircraft.

'I had a puncture on the road and had to change a wheel,' Ginger informed them. 'I need hardly say,' he added cynically, 'that I knew nothing about the tyre being stuffed with diamonds.'

'What did you do with the wheel you took off?' asked Schultz.

'In the ordinary way I would have said I put it on the clips from which I took the spare wheel.'

'Why isn't it there now?'

'One of two things must have happened. Either I left it lying beside the

road, having forgotten to pick it up, or it could have been knocked off while I was blundering about in the dark afterwards, when I was off the road. I bumped into all sorts of things before I ended up in three feet of water. The wheel could have been washed off. So you see, Brabinsky could have told the truth.'

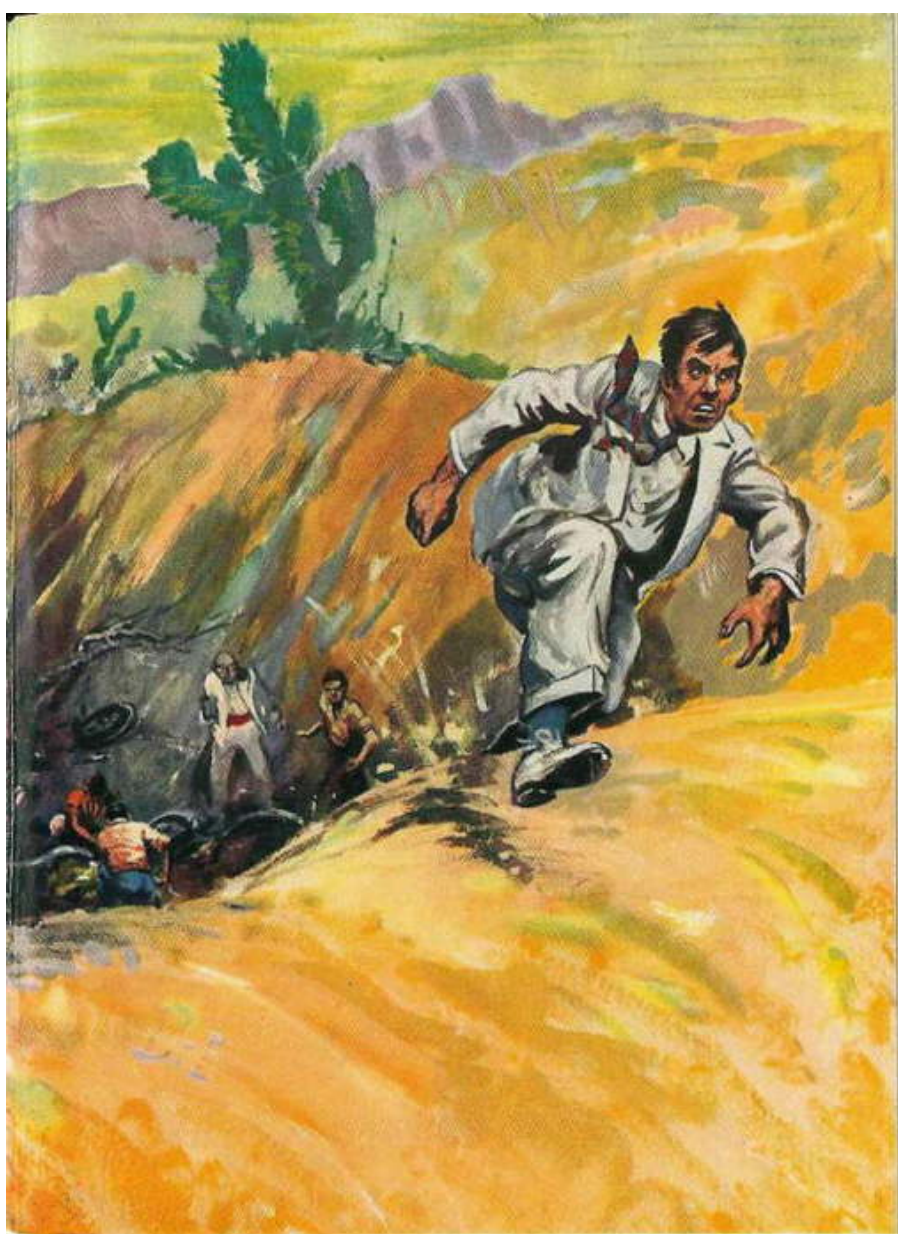
'How could it have been *washed* off?'

'It was dark when I changed over and there's a chance I didn't fasten it securely. I had a job to get the spare wheel off. The clips were new to me.'

All eyes were on Ginger as he made this statement, which he thought did not sound very convincing. The others were looking at him as if they thought the same thing.

Why Ritzy acted as he did Ginger could only guess. It may be that, knowing he was likely to be murdered, he grabbed at a chance to get away with his life. What was perhaps more likely, thinking if he could get away he might find the wheel and hide it somewhere he would be in a stronger position to bargain, he decided to take a chance on getting clear.

Ginger had a suspicion of what he had in mind because while talking, with all eyes on him, he noticed that Ritzy was edging away, cautiously, with occasional sidelong glances at the bank leading to the top of the *arroyo*. Suddenly he spun round and raced for the lip. Raced may not be the right word, although that, no doubt, was what he intended. But the sand was soft and slid from under his feet as it took his weight.



Suddenly Ritzy spun round and raced for the lip (page 158)

The end of this forlorn hope was inevitable. Ritzy got about half-way to the top. There was a volley of shots. He stopped, swayed and collapsed. Then, quite slowly, he rolled over and over back to the bed of the *arroyo*, where, in a crumpled heap, he lay still.

Dry-lipped with horror at the spectacle of this cold-blooded murder Ginger

could only stare. 'You'll pay for that one day,' he heard himself telling Schultz, in a thin flat voice.

'So?' sneered Schultz. 'Who'll make me pay?'

'It may not be me, but you'll pay.'

Schultz pointed his automatic. 'Unless you can find that wheel you'll be next,' he promised, viciously.

CHAPTER 15

GINGER TAKES A CHANCE

GINGER looked at the grim faces confronting him and knew that unless the diamonds were found he could expect no mercy. He would, he thought, be lucky to receive any, either way. His common sense told him that after what he had seen, this ruthless gang, probably chosen for that very quality, would hardly be likely to allow him to walk away and denounce them. He knew too much. Unarmed, he couldn't even make a fight of it. The odds of three to one against him were too great.

The best he could hope for was, having got the diamonds, they would in their haste to get to the border abandon him in the desert. Actually, he was a little surprised that he had not already been shot out of hand. He could only suppose they thought he might be useful to them in identifying the exact spot where he had changed the wheel. This belief turned out to be correct.

The sun was now half down the horizon. In a few minutes it would be dark, and to look for the wheel then, or at any rate until the moon came up, would be a waste of time. He became aware that the aircraft had gone. In his state of mind he had not seen it go.

'Let's get back to the road,' said Schultz. 'You can show us where you changed tyres. If we can't find the wheel beside the road we'll wait for the moon and try to find the cactus you ran into. If you've told the truth there should be marks.'

'If the wheel had been left beside the road we should have seen it this morning when we were on the way to the border, or going back to Eltora,' remarked one of Schultz's men.

'Not necessarily,' disputed Schultz. 'We were going pretty fast.'

They walked on.

Ginger had several times thought of Biggles. He couldn't imagine what he was doing. Where was he? He would certainly be looking for him. According to Juan he had gone off with José in his brake, and that could be for no other purpose that he could think of. Even if he had gone back to Eltora to look for him there, when he found he was not there he would return to the road. He wouldn't just sit down and wait for him.

They were now threading their way, in early twilight, through the mixed desert vegetation towards the road, and Ginger decided that the time had nearly come for him to make a dash for safety. He would wait for it to get a little darker. Darkness would give him a chance. The danger would be in the first rush. If only he could get clear they would never find him in the thorny jungle.

He had no intention of showing Schultz where he had changed wheels even if he could find the place, which he thought unlikely. He had already made up

his mind about that. To do so would be as good as putting the diamonds in Schultz's pocket and he was not going to do that whatever the cost. Once that happened there would no longer be any point in keeping him alive, anyway. On this score Ginger had no delusions. It was plain that the only reason why he had not been shot was because Schultz thought he might still be useful in locating the missing wheel. That would save a lot of time. Schultz had told Ritzy that time was of no importance, but that wasn't true. He wouldn't want to stay in Mexico an hour longer than was necessary. Without help it might take him a very long time to find the wheel.

Ginger perceived clearly that he was now in the position that Ritzy had occupied earlier in the day. Only Ritzy had known exactly where the diamonds had been hidden in the car. Parting with his secret had cost him his life. Now it was thought that he, Ginger, knew where they were — or at all events knew where the vital wheel was. Actually, he didn't know to within a mile, but he was not going to admit that until it became evident. The longer he could keep Schultz guessing the better would be his chance, not only of defeating him but of saving his own life.

Thus thought Ginger as he trudged on, now looking for a good place to put his escape plan into action.

Unable to see any distance ahead he perceived, to his intense disgust and dismay, that he had left it too late. Quite suddenly, without warning, they rounded a clump of mesquit to find themselves on the open road.

Schultz looked at him. 'Well, now do you know where you are?' he questioned, harshly.

Ginger did not know where he was beyond the obvious fact that he was on the road. The road looked much the same everywhere. But following his policy of anything to waste time he was not going to say that.

What he said was: 'I think it must have been somewhere about here, on the other side, that I changed the wheels. The place can't be far away.'

He felt he had to say something. Still looking for the ideal spot to make his dash, saying 'Let's have a look,' he walked across the road to the opposite side. But Schultz, gun in hand, stayed with him. The other two followed.

Ginger saw it was no use. The road was too open. Schultz was too close. Whichever way he went there would be time for shots to be fired and he could hardly hope for all three of them to miss. He began to make a pretence of searching along the verge.

He was still doing this, in a silence that had become menacing, when the million to one chance came off. He saw the wheel.

What he actually saw was the glint of the dying sun on a wheel disc; and even though it was not attached to the wheel he knew the wheel couldn't be far away. There could hardly be two car wheel discs lying beside the lonely road. This, without doubt, was where he had been forced to stop with the puncture.

Oddly enough, either on account of the nervous tension he was under, or

because he was looking at the place, everything suddenly became clear. He remembered every move distinctly. He saw himself jacking up the car and taking off the wheel. He remembered that when in his haste he had thrown it aside it had rolled down a shallow bank into a sagebush, in which doubtless it still rested. He had noted the position of it, and the disc, intending to collect them when he had fixed the spare wheel. He had no recollection of doing that. It was now obvious that what with the darkness, the approaching storm, and his anxiety to press on, he had forgotten to do it.

All this passed through his head in a flash. Holding his breath he took a pace aside, put his foot on the disc and twisted it to grind it deeper into the sand. This done he walked on, still apparently searching. No one spoke.

Ginger breathed again. The men had not noticed anything. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw they were paying more attention to what he was doing than to the road itself. He congratulated himself. They hadn't noticed the disc. It would now be more difficult than ever to find.

In order to keep attention focused on himself, and perhaps to account for his failure to find the wheel, he remarked: 'You realize that if the wheel had been left in view of the road somebody might have come along and picked it up?'

'We should have seen it ourselves,' answered Schultz, shortly.

'You may not have noticed it. The wheel didn't mean anything to you then. Anyway, somebody may have come along before you,' argued Ginger.

'There has been no traffic on the road. We have been on the road ourselves all day and would have seen anyone else on it.'

'What about that old prospector?'

'What use would the wheel have been to him?'

'He might have taken it along and lodged it at the frontier post hoping for a reward. It would have some value, certainly to the man who lost it.'

'We should have seen it when we spoke to him.'

'You wouldn't have seen it had it been under the tarpaulin. That *burro* looked to have a heavy load.'

Although Ginger was talking chiefly for the sake of talking this seemed to be a reasonable argument. But it cut no ice with Schultz.

'What with picks and shovels and crowbars that donkey had enough to carry without a useless wheel,' he said.

'It was just an idea,' returned Ginger. 'It struck me that you could still overtake him before he reached the border.'

This bright suggestion — at least, Ginger thought it was a bright one to gain time — met with no response.

They walked on a little way, Ginger still searching the verge, the others on the road watching him closely. Ginger felt that this couldn't go on much longer and he was right.

One of Schultz's men stopped. 'I've had enough of this,' he grumbled. 'We shan't find anything in this light. Either this kid's fooling us or he knows

nothing. Let's finish with him and go back to Eltora for the night. You can see he's no idea where he changed the wheels. He's just killing time. We can come back tomorrow morning when we shall be able to see better what we're doing.'

'What are you going to say to Bigglesworth?' asked the other man. 'He'll be in Eltora. He'll ask questions.'

'We can deal with him. He'd be better out of the way. He's the only man in the place likely to come looking for this one.'

'I think you are right,' agreed Schultz. 'We'd better go back to the car, or as it's off the road we may have difficulty in finding it.'

They all turned about, and telling Ginger to keep in front where they could see him, started walking back.

So this was the end, thought Ginger, desperately. They would shoot Biggles, too. He had done his best. He had done well to gain a respite, but he couldn't expect the farce to continue indefinitely. His delaying tactics had served their purpose, but they were played out. When they reached the car they would shoot him as they had shot Ritzy. Knowing what he knew the last thing they'd do would be to take him near Eltora.

An idea came to him and he determined on a final effort.

Approaching the area where he knew the wheel to lie he pulled up short, staring at a towering *saguaro* on the far side of the road and a little way back from it. One of its arms had broken and hung down, reaching nearly to the ground.

'Now what is it?' snapped Schultz.

Ginger pointed. 'That cactus. The one with a broken arm. I remember it. It's the one I barged into in the dark. When I ran into it that arm crashed down on top of the car and frightened me to death.'

All this, of course, was perfectly true. Ginger had reason to remember the incident. And, knowing where the wheel really was, he had no hesitation in calling attention to it.

'Well?' questioned Schultz.

'The thought struck me that's where the spare wheel might have been jolted off, or knocked off.'

Ginger waited for the verdict. If they would leave the road to have a look at the foot of the cactus he would have a chance. There had been enough room for him to back out of the mess. That meant there was a little open space surrounded by the usual desert vegetation.

'No harm in looking,' decided Schultz. 'It would save us a lot of time if it was there. I reckoned to be across the border by now.'

They all left the road and picked their way through the few yards of mesquit to the spot where the uncouth vegetable raised its arms. But Schultz was taking no chances of losing his prisoner. He made Ginger walk in front of him. He walked behind with his pistol pushed into the small of Ginger's back. In this manner they reached the little open space which Ginger remembered.

‘He’s right,’ asserted one of Schultz’s men suddenly. There are wheel marks here. And I can see where the car hit the tree. It knocked some of the skin off. It’s still wet where the sap’s running out.’

The pressure on Ginger’s back was relaxed as Schultz took a pace forward to look. All eyes were on the ground.

For Ginger the time had come. His last chance. It was now or never.

‘Look out!’ he cried shrilly. ‘Mind that snake!’

There was no snake. At least, he saw nothing like one. But his shout of alarm served its purpose. In the moment of confusion that followed, with everyone looking wildly for the reptile, he took a swift leap to behind the *saguaro* as if he himself was trying to avoid the snake. He didn’t stop. Once round, bent double, he dived into the nearest *chaparral*. Seconds later, catching his foot in a root he went headlong.

This may have saved his life. It did not take the gang long to realize they had been tricked and the bushes on the line Ginger had taken were slashed with bullets. They all went over him. The instant the shooting stopped he sprang to his feet to go on, only to stumble and fall again as an excruciating pain shot up his leg. He had to clench his teeth to prevent a cry. He knew what had happened.

If he hadn’t broken his ankle he had sprained it badly.

He managed to crawl a little way, the dead cactus thorns with which the ground was covered running into his hands. The underbrush thickened and he could get no farther. Sick with pain he sank down and lay still.

He was still too near the men to risk the slightest movement, for in the profound silence of the desert any sound would be heard. Sometimes the men moved. They were very close. Sometimes they stood still, apparently listening. One of them said: ‘I think we got him. I heard him fall. He can’t be far away.’

‘We’d better make sure,’ came in Schultz’s deep, guttural voice. ‘Shoot at anything that moves.’

Footsteps approached, slowly, cautiously. Sometimes a dry twig would crack.

All Ginger could do was he still, flat on the ground, holding his breath.

¹ Small donkey.

CHAPTER 16

WHAT BIGGLES WAS DOING

TAKING the short cuts José drove Biggles back to Eltora with all possible speed. Throughout the journey Biggles kept a look-out for Ginger, but knowing that his chances of finding him in such a vast area were remote he did not go out of his way to look for him. The vegetation was often sparse, but there were places where it was high enough to conceal a man behind it. He saw neither Ginger nor the Cadillac.

They cruised down the hill into Eltora. Again Biggles looked eagerly for Ginger or the Cadillac. He could see neither. The implication was that the blue car had stopped somewhere between Sonoyta and Eltora. As José remarked, why they did not see it was understandable. They had taken a different route — the short cuts.

At the inn Biggles sought Pepe for information. What he learned relieved him, but also astounded him. Ginger had been back. He had arrived tired, thirsty and hungry. Pepe had made him one of his best Spanish omelettes. The last he had seen of him he was resting on the *patio*. Pepe shrugged expressive shoulders. Where he had gone after that he didn't know.

Biggles was completely mystified. What could Ginger be doing? The only place he could think of was the villa. He got José to drive him to Los Palmeras. Ginger wasn't there. No one was there. Not even Nifty. What to do next Biggles didn't know.

José said the brake needed petrol so they drove back to Lorenzo's store. There the mystery of Ginger's disappearance was solved.

Lorenzo said he had seen Ginger on the *patio*. He appeared to be asleep when the Cadillac drove up. The men in it had spoken to Ginger who had gone with them to the car. The car had then driven off in the direction of the border. Lorenzo remarked that he thought there was something strange about the way this was done. Ginger had behaved as if he didn't want to get in the car, but had been pushed in. Lorenzo hadn't actually seen any weapons used.

'Have you seen Brabinsky?' asked Biggles.

Lorenzo said no. He had not been in the car.

Biggles was seriously alarmed. 'You can see what's happened,' he told José. 'The Cadillac, not seeing Ginger on the road, came back here. They found him on the *patio*. No doubt they asked him where he had left Brabinsky's car. He must have refused to tell them, whereupon they forced him to go with them to show them the place. Knowing nothing about the diamonds being in the car he might, under pressure, show them where it was.'

'We had better go back over the road to see if we can find them,' offered José. 'We shall have to go back to watch for the plane.'

'I'm taking up a lot of your time,' said Biggles, apologetically.

José smiled. 'Time is of no importance. It is in a good cause.'

'It's a good cause where Ginger is concerned,' declared Biggles. 'If Schultz gets the diamonds he's likely to shoot him, in which case we'd never find him. What on earth could have happened to Brabinsky, I wonder?'

'They must either have shot him or abandoned him on the *mesa*,' offered José.

They got back into the brake.

'This time we stay on the road,' said Jose, as they set off. 'If the Cadillac is on the road we must see it.'

With every mile covered Biggles' alarm mounted. They did not see the Cadillac, the reason being, of course, that it had been parked off the road, and out of sight of it. But Biggles was not to know that, and a fear grew on him that Ginger had already been shot and the Cadillac was now well on its way to Sonoyta with the diamonds. But the gems had become secondary. It was Ginger he was worried about.

Several times José stopped the brake to enable Biggles to survey the landscape from the roof. But it was all in vain.

'We had better get a bit nearer the border,' he said, after one such fruitless reconnaissance. 'Then we shall see the plane when it arrives. It might be here any time now. We'll watch it. That seems to be about all we can do.'

José agreed.

They had gone on a few more miles, still searching, when a lonely figure appeared on the sandy trail ahead. It resolved itself into a man with a donkey, plodding across the waste.

'An American prospector going home,' guessed José, correctly. 'We get a few of them here, looking for gold, but they seldom find any.'

'He may know something.'

'I'll stop and ask him.'

The old man told them all he knew, but it did little to clear the air and it certainly did nothing to relieve Biggles' anxiety. He said earlier in the day he had seen a young man walking along the road to Eltora. He had given him a drink. Then a big blue car had come along heading in the same direction. The driver asked him if he had seen anyone on the road and he had answered yes; there was a feller walking to Eltora. That, really, was as much as he knew.

The prospector and his *burro* continued their long walk to the border leaving Biggles standing beside the brake. What had happened on the road that morning was now apparent. Ginger had had a breakdown. He had abandoned the Overland somewhere in the *chaparral* and had walked back to the village.

'What would you like me to do now?' asked José.

'Unless you can think of anything better we might as well wait here for the plane to arrive,' replied Biggles. 'Whichever way we go we could be wrong. The plane is our only chance. If there is anything moving in that blistering desert my friends shouldn't have much difficulty in spotting it.'

Shortly after this a distant purr announced the arrival of the aircraft, which Biggles saw was a Piper Cub. Forthwith it commenced quartering the ground on both sides of the road, and it wasn't long before it spotted the brake and flew low over it. A figure waved. Biggles waved back, and made a signal with his hands to indicate that Ginger had not been found.

The light plane resumed its criss-cross flight, up and down, then on a little way and across again, its altitude varying between five hundred and a thousand feet. All Biggles could do was stand and watch it, or walk beside the brake as Jose moved on from time to time to keep level with the aircraft. This went on for some time, hopes sinking as the day wore on. The search could not go on indefinitely. Assuming that the plane had started from a point far beyond the frontier it would soon be running short of fuel; it would have to keep enough in hand to get back to its base.

Suddenly the Cub slipped off some height and began circling.

'They've seen him,' cried Biggles, galvanized into action.

The little machine came droning towards them. Approaching, the engine was cut, and as it passed low over the brake at little more than stalling speed a small white object came hurtling down to bounce on the road. Biggles ran to it and picked it up. It was a piece of paper — a used envelope addressed to Bertie to be precise — with two English pennies to give it weight. On it a message had been scrawled. For José's benefit Biggles read it aloud: 'Party of five in gulley. Car there. Half mile from road. Will mark again, then home. Petrol low.'

Biggles waved to the banking plane to show that he understood.

The machine flew out again, circled twice, and then stood away to the north.

Said José: 'He must mean the *arroyo* that flattens out as it crosses the road about a mile on from here. Our best plan would be to drive on to it, then get out and follow it. In that way we can't miss them.'

'You know best,' returned Biggles. 'There are five of them. I take that to mean Brabinsky's with them. Let's go.'

The brake raced on to where, looking like a dry river bed, the *arroyo* crossed the road. José drove as far as he could into the *chaparral* to leave the road clear. They jumped out and set off at a fast walk up the sandy bottom of the cutting. This went deeper into the ground as they advanced so they were unable to see anything outside it. Not that it mattered if the party was actually in the *arroyo*. The heat was overwhelming, although José, accustomed to such conditions, may have felt it less than Biggles, who, having been out in the sun all day, was approaching a state of nervous exhaustion. Their feet made no sound on the soft sand, and for this reason a short sharp fusillade of gun-shots came plainly to their ears.

Biggles looked at José. 'They've shot him,' he said through his teeth, and broke into a run.

In a few minutes, rounding a bend, they saw the car. There was no one

with it. At least, no one alive. But as they ran up they saw a body face down on the sand. Biggles dashed up to it. 'Brabinsky,' he said, with a deep breath of relief.

He made a quick examination of the body. 'Shot through the back. He must have been running away. No diamonds. No money.' He took a German automatic from Ritzy's pocket. 'Queer. He didn't even try to defend himself. I'll keep this. I may need it.'

'*Caramba!* Look what they've done to the car!' exclaimed José. 'They've even cut the tyres to pieces.'

'I can see what's happened here,' asserted Biggles. 'The diamonds were in the car. Only Brabinsky knew where. He wouldn't tell them, so they tore the car to pieces and then shot him so they wouldn't have to pay him. In that way Schultz gets the diamonds and the money. They must now be making for the road.'

This was a reasonable theory, but it was not entirely correct.

'The easiest way to the road would be up the *arroyo*,' Jose pointed out. 'Why didn't they go that way?'

'They may be making direct for their car. It can't be far off. Let's see if we can see them.' So saying Biggles scrambled up the bank to the lip of the arroyo and looked around. 'Not a sign of 'em,' he muttered. 'Where can they be? They can't have gone far.'

'It's unlikely you'd see them if they were walking through the *chaparral*,' said Jose, joining him. 'One must get above it. Wait a minute.' He ran to a ridge of out-cropping rock and clambered to the top. 'I see them,' he called, pointing. 'Four of them. As you thought, making for the road.' He jumped down.

'How far away are they?' asked Biggles.

'They're nearly there.'

'Let's get after them,' said Biggles, tersely.

'If the Cadillac is there we shall be too late,' observed José. 'They've got a long start.'

Biggles didn't answer. He realized only too well that what José had said was true, but they could at least try. It was all they could do.

They set off again, dodging in and out through the *chaparral* at a speed that even sent the sweat pouring down the face of the acclimatized Mexican. To make matters more difficult the light was beginning to fail. Biggles expected every second to hear the Cadillac start, and although he didn't hear it, in his heart he felt sure it must have gone.

They still hadn't heard it when they came to within sight of the road. Common sense now counselled prudence. Ignoring thorns Biggles climbed on the stump of a fallen *saguaro* and to his unspeakable relief saw the blue top of the Cadillac, in the *chaparral* a little distance off the road, not far away.

In the deepening twilight they approached it cautiously, guns in hand, listening at intervals for the sound of voices. They heard none. And when

presently they walked up to the car they saw no one with it.

‘I don’t understand this,’ said Biggles, quietly. ‘What can they be doing?’

‘Maybe they can’t find the car. They may have struck the road at the wrong place. But they’re bound to come back here sooner or later. I’d say our best plan is to wait for them, or we might miss them in the dark. One can’t see far even on the road in this light.’

Biggles agreed, although in his anxiety he was by no means convinced they were doing the right thing.

Presently, as they stood there in the sultry silence, listening intently, there came a sudden shout, followed immediately by a volley of pistol shots. The noise was comparatively close.

Without a word Biggles ran out on to the road. He looked up and down. There was no one in sight. He raced in the direction from which the shots had come, and as he ran he shouted: ‘Ginger! Where are you?’

Ginger heard him but he daren’t answer. Schultz was too close. A sound, he thought, would bring more shots. He could hear stealthy movements in the mesquit. His nerves tingled when there was a sudden rush, a shot, the crash of a falling body, then more furtive movements in the underbrush. Footsteps pattered softly on the dusty road, running. They stopped. Again came Biggles’ voice, very close. ‘Ginger! Where are you?’

Fearing he might go past Ginger took a chance and shouted: ‘Here I am. Be careful. Schultz —’

The rest of what he was going to say was lost in such a scream of terror that in spite of the heat Ginger’s blood ran cold. What had caused it he couldn’t imagine.

‘Where are you?’ came Biggles’ voice again, from a few yards away.

‘I’m here. On the ground,’ answered Ginger. ‘I’ve twisted my ankle.’ Swaying unsteadily he managed to get to his feet.

‘Thank God you’re all right,’ said Biggles, fervently, as he joined him. ‘What was that shooting about?’

‘The first shots were at me,’ said Ginger. ‘I don’t know about that last single shot. The bullet didn’t come near me.’

‘Where’s Schultz?’

‘I don’t know, but he must be somewhere about. They were all here a moment ago so watch out.’

‘Let’s get on the road and see what’s happening.’

With an arm round Ginger’s shoulders Biggles was helping him through the *chaparral* when from the direction of the road came two shots in quick succession — unmistakably the crack of an automatic and the heavier report of a revolver.

‘That must be José,’ remarked Biggles. ‘Keep going.’

‘That last single shot came from about here,’ said Ginger. ‘What are you looking at?’

Biggles had stopped, staring, peering forward at something on the ground. 'Just a minute,' he muttered 'There's somebody here.' Still peering, he moved forward a little. 'What the— My gosh! It's Schultz,' he ejaculated. 'He looks like a goner. Did you shoot him?'

'I couldn't shoot anybody. I haven't a gun,' reminded Ginger.

'Of course. I forgot. Then Schultz must have been shot by one of his pals, by accident. Or was it an accident? Stand fast.' Biggles knelt by the body. After a short pause he went on: 'He hasn't got the diamonds on him.'

'He's never had them. He couldn't find them.'

'What about the money?'

'One of the others was carrying the portfolio. The money was in it.'

Biggles stood up. 'Let's get to the road,' he said shortly.

When they reached it there were two figures on it. One, standing, was José. The other lay on the ground, the portfolio beside it.

'What's happened here?' asked Biggles.

José pointed to the prone figure. 'This one ran out of the brush. When he saw me he pulled a gun. We both fired. I shot him.'

'There's another. Have you seen him?'

'No. But I heard a scream. He must still be in the *chaparral*.'

'He'll make for the Cadillac,' said Biggles. 'We'd better get to it in case — listen!'

From somewhere in the bushes, near at hand, came the sound of a man moaning.

'It sounds as if he's been shot too,' said Biggles.

'I don't think so,' returned José. 'A man who's been shot doesn't moan like that. I've heard that noise before.'

Biggles started forward. 'I'd better go and see —'

José caught him by the arm. 'Don't go in there.'

'Why not?'

'It may be a trick, but I think that man's been struck by a snake. It may still be about.'

'You mean — he might have stepped on one?'

'It can easily happen. There are plenty of them.'

As they listened again, Ginger sank down, exhausted. The moaning had stopped. Instead, there were sounds as if someone was dragging himself through the brush. A man appeared, swaying. He staggered a few yards and fell flat. In a weak voice he gasped, 'Help me. I've been bitten by a snake.'

José went forward. 'Where did it bite you?'

'In the leg.'

Jose whipped out a knife. He had to slit the trousers, so badly was the leg already swollen. He did what he could, lacerating the punctures; but blood refused to flow freely. He looked at Biggles and grimaced, shaking his head.

'Is there any serum in Eltora?' asked Biggles.

'No. There's no doctor. He'd be dead before we could get him there,

anyway.'

'There's nothing we can do?'

'Nothing more. He's too far gone to be walked up and down to keep his blood moving.'

José continued to work on the leg, but it was no use, and a little later, after a few gasps, the man died.

'Well that seems to be the lot,' observed Biggles, philosophically. 'A classic example of what can happen when rogues fall out.' He turned to Ginger, who was still sitting on the road. 'We'd better see about getting you to Eltora where we can have a look at that ankle. I shall be interested to hear what you've been doing since you went off in Ritzy's car. Did I understand you to say Schultz hadn't found the diamonds?'

'That's right. The money to pay for them is still in that portfolio. I've seen it.'

'How did Ritzy get shot?'

'He couldn't find the diamonds so he tried to bolt.'

'Weren't they in the car?'

'He thought they were, but they weren't.'

'You mean, somebody had moved 'em?'

'Yes.'

'Who was it — do you know?'

'It was me, but I didn't know it at the time.'

Biggles stared. 'Are you telling me *you* know where they are?'

'I think so. It seems that Ritzy had stuck them on the inside of one of the tyres with adhesive tape. What happened was this. Last night, just before that confounded storm broke, I had a puncture. Naturally, I put on the spare wheel, but in my hurry I left the one I'd taken off, which was the one with the diamonds in, lying by the track. That's why Ritzy couldn't find 'em. Not knowing about the puncture he was completely foxed.'

'Can you remember where you left the wheel?'

'Yes. We were supposed to be looking for it when you turned up. As a matter of fact I'd already seen it, but I didn't say so.'

'What were you doing in the *chaparral*?'

'Leading Schultz up the garden path and at the same time looking for a chance to bolt. I tried it. That's what caused the shooting. I might have got away with it if I hadn't tripped over something and wrenched my ankle.'

'Where's the wheel?'

'A little way along the road, in a bush on the far side.'

'So that was it,' murmured Biggles. 'I think I can see what happened here,' he went on. 'When I called out, this fellow with the portfolio must have thought the game was up and decided to get away with the dollars. He disposed of Schultz by shooting him and then made for the Cadillac. Unfortunately for him he ran into José, who was standing on the road. This other man was probably following him when he stepped on a rattlesnake. But

we'd better see about finding that wheel.'

'I'll fetch my brake and he can show us the place,' offered José. 'Then we'd better get back to Eltora. The police will have to be told about this shooting so we'd better leave the bodies where they lie for them to see.'

Biggles agreed. 'I hope you won't find it necessary to say anything about the diamonds.'

'I understand,' said Jose.

He went off and presently came back with the brake. While he was away Biggles collected the portfolio, saying: 'We might as well take this.'

They helped Ginger into the brake, and in a few minutes he was pointing to the spot where he had seen the disc.

Biggles got out and almost at once came back with the missing wheel. 'We won't fiddle with this here,' he said, putting it in the back of the brake.

As they headed for Eltora Ginger said: 'What beats me is how you managed to find me.'

'That aircraft spotted you,' replied Biggles. 'You must have seen it.'

'I did, but I didn't realize it had anything to do with me.'

'Algy and Bertie were in it,' explained Biggles. 'I'll tell you about that later.'

CHAPTER 17

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

THAT, for all practical purposes, was the end of Biggles' assignment in Mexico.

On arrival in Eltora after recovering the wheel José dropped his passengers at the *posada* and went home. Biggles put a cold water bandage on Ginger's ankle, which was badly swollen, and then, tired out, they both went to bed for a night's rest. It was obvious that Ginger would have to lie up for a few days.

In the morning, not without difficulty, Biggles removed the four small wash-leather bags that contained the diamonds from the inside of the tyre and, with the money found in the portfolio, put them in a safe place. After that they could only wait for Ginger's ankle to heal. It was a bad sprain, but it was not broken, so it was just a matter of time.

José looked in to see how they were getting on. In fact, he became a regular visitor, and on one occasion introduced Biggles to Margarita, the unwitting cause of Cornelli's death, the event that had played such an important part in the affair. The police came too, of course, and Biggles made a statement that satisfied them.

A few days later Algy and Bertie arrived by car from California, anxious to learn the details of what had happened.

Biggles' only remaining problem was what to do with the diamonds. He was unwilling to declare them at Customs, for this would inevitably mean delay and involve awkward explanations. He did not, of course, contemplate trying to smuggle them across the frontier.

Algy's car solved the difficulty.

As soon as Ginger was fit to travel they said good-bye to José and went by road to Mexico City, the capital of the country. There, glad to be rid of them, Biggles handed over the precious stones, and the dollar bills, to the British authorities, and left it to them to get them home. This relieved him of any further responsibility, so all they had to do was make their way back to London, which they did by the regular air services.

What happened to Nifty Brimshawe was a minor mystery. He was never seen again in Eltora, and when Biggles' party left the police were still looking for him. With the two hundred dollars Biggles had given to him he may have reached the United States or taken ship to one of the South American ports. In England the police are still waiting for him, and they can be very patient.

THE END